Strange Days

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Strange Days

by bluesyturtle

Summary

It's the beginning of the end as some things fall apart and other plans come to fruition at last.

Notes

Morning found us calmly unaware/Noon burned gold into our hair/At night, we swim in the laughin' sea/When summer's gone/Where will we be?

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into Polski available: Dziwne Dni by erraticmuse

Summer's Almost Gone

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal is lying on his back on an inclined surface. The room is dark, but he can hear that he isn't alone. A spot on his right arm emits a soft glow as if with a flame. When he turns his head to look, he sees that the glare is actually reflected light captured on the surface of a blade lodged halfway in his shoulder right about where the acromion process would be.

He tries to look away but something tangled in his hair catches on the surface his body is strapped onto. The passage of light to the steel sunken into his flesh is blocked by the silhouette of an arm. It tugs at the obstruction which, Hannibal notes now, is wedged inside the parietal bone of his skull. His head turns when the arm commands him, steering his gaze with the splintered club like a key turning a lock.

He is bound to the table. He can't move; can't run.

"You have to stop doing that, baby," Will scolds him, gently, as if he were speaking to a small, frightful child with a skinned knee. "You keep doing that."

"Doing what, Will?"

Hannibal watches him draw a sword from behind the tilted table. The metallic slide of steel on granite nearly echoes in the quiet room. Hannibal recognizes their surroundings. They're in the cellar of his house in Baltimore; a lonely cone of light shines down from the opened door that leads into the hallway. Hannibal thinks it might be coming from the kitchen.

Connection established in his mind, his vision clears slightly. The room is still pitch black, but the minimalistic furnishings of the room begin to take shape. He can make out the outline of the freezer, the wine rack against the far wall, and the ice bucket before it dripping perspiration and overflowing with ice.

"Trying to control the situation," Will answers easily. There is a smile in his words, though Hannibal can't see him even with his eyes adjusted to the darkness. "Trying to control me."

Will places his free hand against Hannibal's ribcage and draws the tip of the sword in between the third and fourth rib on Hannibal's left side. His fingers are separated from Hannibal by a thin layer of cold leather. The blade pierces through Hannibal's skin and creeps into his body, several inches above the hilt of a dagger already lodged in his stomach. His blood runs black in the shadows.

Nothing hurts. He could be dreaming, but he could be anesthetized. He could be asleep, or Will could be killing him.

"You had no sense of direction when I found you," Hannibal says. Blood pools on the floor beneath his dangling feet.

“And look at us now,” Will muses, wrenching a spear through the tendons and ligaments in Hannibal’s unfeeling elbow joint. Will laughs, genuinely, over the sharp cracking sounds and taps his chin with the hilt of a small kitchen knife. “Still technically taking my cues from you,” he says, gesturing at the set-up and the room in general. He waves the knife at Hannibal, and it could easily be the same one he cut himself on so long ago. “But we wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t pointed me north. Thank you for that.”

He sets the tip of the blade against Hannibal’s cheekbone and presses so the point digs into his skin but doesn’t slice through. His eyes flash blue in the darkness and then fade to an unseeable black, a wintry stag identifying itself to calm Hannibal’s unsteady heart. It beats unnaturally with the tempo of a valse in his ears but not anywhere he can physically feel it.

Will’s teeth glisten with his smile, and the knife presses through.

“These facial wounds,” Will drawls. “Am I meant to stab you all the way through? No, we’ll come back to that.”

Will steps around him with the bloodied knife in hand. It clicks softly on the granite counter top against the wall. He comes back around empty-handed and ungloved. He takes Hannibal’s wrist in his fingers, his touch almost apologetic.

Hannibal hears himself say, “Pity the student who does not surpass the master.”

Will kisses Hannibal’s thumb and the spot over the trapezium. He asks, “Were you my master, Hannibal?”

He pulls away and in one violent, accurate jerk, the bones snap apart at the joint beneath the skin. Will lets go, and the arm drops dully to Hannibal’s side.

“You were your own master, Will. Perhaps you became mine.”

*“Perhaps?” Will’s voice is teasing. He places a bare hand over Hannibal’s sternum. “*This *is mine. You’re mine.”*

His other hand lifts a scalpel to sit beside his fingers on his Hannibal’s skin, blade poised to make a vertical incision. The razor edge cuts through the skin from the xiphoid process below the bottom ridge of Hannibal’s ribcage to his navel. Will tosses the scalpel aside and with that freed hand holding Hannibal’s shoulder, he plunges his other into the gushing wound. He winds beneath the ribcage and through the organs, burying his arm to the elbow and drenching his front in tar-black blood.

Something pops loudly and disconnects in Hannibal’s chest cavity. Will’s hand emerges bright red and shining. Hannibal’s heart pumps frantically in his palm, propelling an endless, brightening stream of sanguinary violet from the right ventricle.

“This is mine,” Will repeats. He presses his lips to the left atrium. The sticky red cardiac muscle glows effervescently, illuminating Will’s face at last. He tears off a shred with his teeth, and a fire is released into the room that engulfs the space entirely but doesn’t burn them, doesn’t dare consume them.

Hannibal's body trembles with loss of blood; spasms course through his limbs. The club buried in his skull and pulling on his hair catches again on the table. Will holds the burning heart in his hands, a soft smile on his face.

He says, "Fire; pure sensation."

"You know what you're doing, don't you?"

Will's smile widens. He extends the heart to Hannibal. The slick red organ presses against his lips, and unable to do anything else, Hannibal partakes.

The heart is ash and sludge in Hannibal's mouth. It chokes him and runs down his chin in slimy rivulets.

"I'm elevating you to an art form," Will laughs. The sound carries and has a hollow ringing note to it that Will's laugh never actually possesses. It's the sound of bells; it's the sound of metal bars clanging closed and locking forever. It's the sound of chains; the sound of imprisonment.

He eats half of the heart before Will takes it away. The word "greedy" falls from his lips, and he devours the last of it, extinguishing the fire as it exists in that medium but creating a corona through and around him. The light crowns him with a halo and gives him a strength and a grace to augment that which he has already. His smile is a tragedy and a symphony and a miracle and a desecration. It is purity and destruction; it is the embodiment of true chaos and chaotic truth.

"Elevating yourself," Hannibal whispers. His voice is a hoarse rattle. It is all he has left, and it, too, is quickly fading.

Will grins, mischievous and terrifying and magnificent.

He whispers, "This is my design."

Hannibal opens his eyes, and for a moment lies perfectly still, basking uncomfortably in his disorientation. He closes his eyes again and concentrates on the silence.

He is in bed, a warm body is curled up next to him, and the stars are still out. His wrist is unbroken; his heart is intact. He turns his head to find Will crowding him with his face peaceful and his hair hanging over his eyes. Hannibal brushes it away, seeking to ground himself in something temporal and far from the realm of his dreams.

Without opening his eyes or giving any indication that he is awake, Will asks, "What was it?"

"What was what, Will?"

They are in Will's bed in Wolf Trap, Virginia. Hannibal needs to be up in three hours to make the drive to his practice an hour away.

"You were having a bad dream," Will sighs. He shifts against Hannibal's side, eyes still unopened and forehead pressed against Hannibal's neck. He is warm but not to the point of

fever. The IV attached to his arm leads out to a metal stand beside the bed. There is a dog sleeping in the doorway and another at the foot of the bed.

“Was I?”

Will pinches him and says, “Hannibal.”

He sighs and makes himself relax back into the mattress. Will responds to the slight change by nuzzling him slightly and wrapping his arm back around Hannibal’s waist. There is a persistent tremor in his forearm.

“You murdered me.”

Will’s breath catches in the back of his throat. His body stiffens. Hannibal feels his throat bob once against his shoulder. He stammers, “I—Murdered? How?”

“You removed my heart.”

“Like with Parish?”

“Differently,” Hannibal says, remembering Will’s fingers grasping at his heart and twisting until the aorta and connecting tissue snapped off as easily as an apple breaking free from a tree branch. “You fed it to me and ate what was left. It gave you a light; made you divine.”

“Eating your heart made me divine.”

“I can’t think of another way to put it.” Will is quiet for a long time. Hannibal wonders if he has fallen back asleep, but his eyelashes flutter against his skin, the lightest suggestion of a touch. Knowing he’s given himself away, Will squeezes Hannibal’s side with his fingers. “How do you feel, Will?”

He grunts in reply, the hand resting at his side on the mattress migrating to his flank and barring his arm across his abdomen. Hannibal turns onto his side and brushes Will’s arm to the side, slowly insinuating his hand over the offending ache. Will rests his elbow back on the mattress and holds the back of Hannibal’s wrist.

“The immunoglobulin,” Hannibal supplies.

Will groans and buries his face in the pillow. He says, “Cyclosporine causes abdominal pain, too.”

“Splitting hairs.”

“It doesn’t feel like splitting hairs to me,” Will snaps at him.

Gently, Hannibal asks, “What can I do, Will?”

He sighs, turning his cheek so he can see over the pillow and look at Hannibal. He appears to consider Hannibal’s question, and Hannibal knows as soon as Will takes a breath what he will say next.

“Tell me about your dream.”

“I was strapped onto a table. I might have been naked.”

Will laughs, strained, “So far, so good.”

Hannibal moves his hand over Will’s stomach soothingly. He lets himself chuckle, which earns a small smile from Will. Hannibal shifts onto his stomach, hand flattening over Will’s stomach as Will turns with him to lie on his back. Their shoulders brush, Will’s hand finds Hannibal’s arm at the elbow, and Hannibal’s other hand threads through Will’s hair.

“There was a wooden club lodged in my skull, here.” Hannibal presses down gently. He massages Will’s scalp; the hand on Will’s stomach tracks up to his ribs. “There were two blades; one here and another here.” He points to each spot and finds Will’s hand lying again on his stomach, fingers weakly clutching at his skin. “You broke my wrist; the ulnar and the radius, specifically.” Hannibal touches his forefinger to each bone as he names it.

He watches Will frown, thinking about the dream. His eyes light up with recognition.

“Jesus, that’s…it’s Wound Man.”

Hannibal considers the extent of the injuries. He says, “Yes.”

Will brushes his thumb against the back of Hannibal’s hand and laces their fingers together. He asks, “And your heart?”

“You cut me open and pulled it out.”

“And we ate it, and it lit me up?” At Hannibal’s nod, Will asks, softly, “How? What do you mean?”

Hannibal closes his eyes and conjures the image once more in his mind. Will squeezes his fingers, and Hannibal notices the chill sweeping down his arms.

“It started here.” Hannibal removes his hand from Will’s hair and taps his forefinger on his throat. Will swallows. “I could see your face,” Hannibal whispers. He leans in and kisses Will, chastely. “You were smiling, beautiful.”

“Were?”

Hannibal kisses him again, smoothing out the smirk on Will’s lips.

“You *are* beautiful, Will.”

And mischievous and terrifying and magnificent, he wants to tell him. He keeps it to himself, not entirely sure why he should keep it from Will but feeling definitively that he must if only for the time being.

Will hums and traces the back of Hannibal’s arm with the hand not interlocked with Hannibal’s. He sighs and closes his eyes. He looks exhausted, but the tension in his jaw never

quite leaves him.

“Where did the light come from?”

“My heart,” Hannibal says. “It burst into flames when you bit it.”

“Always with the fire,” Will laughs softly, eyes still closed. “Fire and stags and human hearts.”

“Can we help that we are physical beings, Will?”

Hannibal presses a kiss to Will’s shoulder, and Will watches him. A tendon in his neck is still stretched taut with the exertion of staving off the pain in his abdomen. His fingers twitch against Hannibal’s hand and arm with the desire to push that pain down with his hands.

“Would you like an aspirin, Will?”

He shakes his head. Through his teeth he says, “I took some a little over an hour ago. It isn’t helping.”

Undeterred, Hannibal pulls his hand away from Will’s and places it on his hip. Will balls his hand up into a fist and digs into the bottom of his ribcage where he sliced into Hannibal in his dream.

“Would you like something else, Will?”

Will asks, almost incoherent, “What?”

Hannibal kisses him on the cheek and trails his hand down lower to cup Will through his tiny shorts. Will gasps and grabs Hannibal’s wrist. His palm is sweaty.

“No, it’s okay, Hann. I don’t—*need*…” Will grits his teeth together and groans. His fingers spasm and cause his blunt nails to dig into Hannibal’s skin. “*Damn* it.” He writhes in place and starts to twist away from Hannibal, but Hannibal stops him.

“You should have woken me sooner, Will,” Hannibal chastises him lightly. He presses another kiss to Will’s chin and then to his jaw. “I can help you sleep.”

Will shakes his head and says, “You don’t have to.”

“Would you be surprised to hear that I am quite fond of doing this to you?”

Will contemplates the question, seriously, and answers, “No, actually.”

“Then let me.”

Gradually, Will’s grip loosens and relinquishes its hold over Hannibal’s wrist. Hannibal slips his hand beneath the smooth cotton and feels Will thick and heavy in his shorts. He kisses Will’s throat, tongues at his pulse, and murmurs against his skin, “Physical beings, Will.”

Will sucks a breath in through his teeth and lets it out in a shaky sigh. He says, “I fed you your own heart.”

“Yes, Will.”

“And then I—I ate it, what was left. *Oh,* fuck.” The tip of Will’s cock beads with Cowper’s fluid; it eases the slide of Hannibal’s palm up and down the shaft. Will is panting already, body too eager with the promise of sexual fulfillment to hold back. “Why did you? Do you know?”

Hannibal flicks his thumb across the head. He feels Will groan against his lips and chin through his chest and through the thin t-shirt he’s wearing. Hannibal bunches it up with his free hand and bends down to kiss Will’s ribs. He moves his hand faster.

“I know I could not refuse you.”

Will groans, hips lifting off the bed into Hannibal’s hand. He holds onto the pillow beneath his head and licks his lips. Hannibal bends down further and removes his hand from Will’s boxers long enough to pull them down his thighs. He leans down and takes Will into his mouth, enjoying his apparent sensitivity and responsiveness. Will’s fingers twist and pull at Hannibal’s hair. A swear trips off his tongue followed by a breathless gasp.

He breathes, “Hannibal, *Hannibal*, oh, my…”

Will is big in his mouth, and he gives off an interesting smell: faintly sweet with the remnants of inflammation stewing in his brain and subtly warming his blood, acrid with hints of immunoglobulin and corticosteroids pumping through his system, and balmy the way Will always tastes and smells when they have sex in any sense of the word. It is one of Hannibal’s favorite things, that peculiar, comforting undertone present in Will’s sweat, in his saliva, in his semen, and even in his blood. It stirs an animal hunger in Hannibal; a desire to cultivate it, to further it, to amplify it, and to preserve it within his memory palace forever.

Will’s hips jerk twice, gagging Hannibal the second time. His fingers tighten in Hannibal’s hair. His skin pricks beneath Hannibal’s hands. He lifts Will’s hips and dips his head down, taking him just deeper into his mouth than what would be comfortable. Will responds the way he expects him to. His back arches, his fingers squeeze Hannibal’s scalp and his shoulder. He comes quietly, whole body shuddering and mouth opened wide in a silent scream.

Hannibal swallows the evidence of Will’s satiation. It tastes much the same way that it smells; sweet but pungent on his tongue with a dewy aftertaste. He crawls back up the length of the mattress to lie next to Will’s heaving body.

Will turns on his side, and Hannibal curves his body around him. Behind his ear against the hairline, Hannibal whispers, “Sleep, Will.”

Will’s only reply is to mumble something indiscernible and drift off. His fingers tangle lazily with Hannibal’s for all of five seconds before going slack with relieved slumber. Hannibal watches Will’s sleeping face for a moment before easing in beside him and trying to find sleep for himself. It doesn’t come easily.

He loses track of time counting Will's inhales and exhales in the dark and timing the movement of the stars across the window pane, but Will doesn't stir once. Hannibal would feel haughty for knocking him out so effectively, but given his state, Will's desperation and subjection to pain factored greatly into the intensity of his orgasm. Hannibal could only take so much credit.

Hannibal touches the tip of his finger to the white patch over the IV in Will's arm. The timing could not have been better for beginning his treatment. Hannibal would have to find a way to thank Jack for sending him home, maybe with dinner for the man and his wife.

Since Will had contaminated the LeBeau crime scene, he had been allotted time to rest without scrutiny from others; time to bear the sharpest brunt of immunotherapy. Putting the fire out would be the most damaging to Will's body as his immune system weakened, but with the proper attention to his diet, Hannibal could combat the worst of it with vitamins and health supplements. The inflammation of his right hemisphere was so total on the MRI scan, Hannibal doesn't doubt it could take Will anywhere from two to three months to fully recover. It would interfere with their plans, most likely. That would be fine.

It can only aid Will's defense if he is taken in with an illness of the brain. It can only draw out the inevitable reveal. It can only give them more time to be this way, warm and tangled up in bed together.

Through the glass, the black night slowly takes on the deep violet color of a distant but approaching dawn. Hannibal waits a few minutes longer to luxuriate in the pleasant heat generated between his body and Will's. He breathes in the medicinal smells nestled in Will's hair deep at the roots; he takes another breath in and locates Will's tantalizing scent buried beneath those of the drugs. He commits that fragrance in combination with the feel of Will's hand in his and the sight of the darkened bedroom to memory. Only then can he reconcile leaving the bed.

Hannibal walks back into the hall and showers quickly. He gets dressed into the suit hanging in a protective bag on the back of the door and combs his hair. On his way to the kitchen, he sees a large black dog dozing on its side in Hannibal's spot with its back curved against Will's side. Hannibal wrinkles his nose at the sight but leaves them undisturbed. Will may find comfort in the dog's presence, and that counts for something.

He heads straight for the refrigerator and pulls out several items he purchased on his way over last night. He starts working on preparing a large bowl of fruit salad for Will to eat when he wakes. The raspberries and blueberries go into the bowl first followed by hulled and chopped strawberries and two bananas.

He cuts his finger peeling an apple, which he then has to expose to freshly grated lemon zest. He grits his teeth through it more out of irritation than pain. He barely feels the sting at all. His mind has been wandering since he woke up.

Hannibal tosses the berries, banana slices, and chunks of apple thoroughly with the lemon and a teaspoon of honey.
He refrigerates the covered bowl and starts in on the bruschetta for Will's lunch.

He parboils six tomatoes on the stovetop and skins the soft fruits one by one. He quarters them, scoops out the seeds, and removes the stems. He washes and dries his hands and notices a dog watching him from the foot of the couch in the den. The little white dog watches him chop the tomatoes, mince two cloves of garlic, and chop the basil. Hannibal mixes the tomatoes and garlic into a bowl with vinegar and olive oil and finally adds the basil, salt, and pepper.

He covers that bowl in foil and pens a note with further instructions for preparing the baguettes in the oven when Will makes them for lunch. He leaves the note on top of the bowl in the fridge and closes the door. The little white dog is sitting at his feet; it looks up at Hannibal curiously but not expectantly.

The dog has a massive under bite. Hannibal thinks its name might be Mandy.

He stares at the dog, and the dog stares back. As far as he can tell, the rest of the dogs are asleep in Will's room. Hannibal turns on the water in the sink and quietly opens the cupboard where Will keeps the treats. He takes one down from the bag and closes it, scanning the area to see if the other dogs were alerted by a Pavlovian response to the sound of the bag opening. The house is silent but for the running water. Hannibal turns it off, and the dog wags its tail at the sight of the treat in Hannibal's hand.

He bends down with his fingers closed over the treat and says, "Sit."

The dog obeys the command and calmly accepts the treat once it is freely offered. He observes the dog crunch happily on the treat and then genially sniff at his fingers. He pulls his hand back when she starts to lick the center of his palm and straightens out.

Will is standing in the hallway watching him, ruffled from sleep. There is a tiny smile on his lips.

"I didn't think you liked my dogs," he says, walking into the kitchen with his IV stand beside him.

Hannibal ignores him and washes his hands in the sink. Will comes around his side and kisses his neck and jaw.

"There is bruschetta in the fridge. The baguettes are here." Hannibal gestures at the cupboard nearest to them with a towel. He folds it and places it back on the counter. Will nods against his shoulder, obviously still tired.

"Thank you," he mumbles against Hannibal's suit jacket. His breath is warm through the material.

"You didn't have to see me off, Will." Hannibal turns and winds his arm around Will's waist. He is still in his bed clothes.

"Simon always snores when he gets to sleep on the bed," Will says with a shrug. A thought occurs to him, and he says, "Oh, I'll wash the sheets before you get home."

“Leave them as they are.” Hannibal rubs his knuckles along the triceps brachii of the arm attached to the IV. “Go back to sleep. Have some fruit when you wake up.”

“Did you make fruit salad?”

“Yes.”

Will peeks into the refrigerator and sees the tomatoes beside the bowl of covered fruit. Hannibal watches him skim the directions on the note regarding the bruschetta. He closes the door.

“If you keep feeding me rabbit food, I’m going to start to be more critical of your unorthodox choices in meat.”

“You wanted me to treat you for your encephalitis, Will.”

Will frowns but goes with Hannibal anyway into the hall. He settles back into bed twenty minutes before Hannibal needs to leave and says, “I just wanted to say, about last night, thank you. It really—it helped.”

“You would have done it for me,” Hannibal muses, sitting on the edge of the bed beside Will with the IV stand several inches away from his knee.

Will laughs and says, “You don’t have to be sick for me to do that to you.”

“Nor do you, Will.”

They stare, the space between them charged. Will bites his lip.

“I think you should play hooky with me today.”

“Do you?” Hannibal smirks at Will’s cheeky grin. He bends down and kisses him. Will almost certainly musses Hannibal’s hair in the back, but he can’t find it in himself to care either way. Against Will’s lips, he mumbles, “I have patients.”

Will pushes his tongue into Hannibal’s mouth, stealing the breath right out of his lungs. Will says, “So cancel.”

Hannibal presses their foreheads together so Will can’t intercept his speech again with his tongue.

“It would be the second time in two weeks, Will.”

“But I’m sick.”

“My patients are sick as well.”

Will sighs; he knew going in that his argument would not win out. His disappointment is palpable, though, and Hannibal does feel haughty about that.

“No one must know of your condition, Will. How would it look if I continued to miss work while you were out?”

“Like you love me,” Will mumbles, pulling Hannibal over his leg and onto the bed. “Like you can’t stand to be away from me.”

“Will,” Hannibal murmurs, a half-hearted warning. He checks his watch. “You were in excruciating pain hours ago.”

“Says you.”

Hannibal props himself up on his elbows and looks down at Will incredulously. A slow lazy grin spreads across his face. Hannibal squints at him.

“It hurt a little bit, and I couldn’t sleep,” he explains sheepishly. “What? You’re a bad influence.”

“Thank you.”

Will laughs and wraps his legs around Hannibal’s waist. Hannibal sighs, running a hand down Will’s thigh.

“I guess it does take one to know one,” Will says. He looks down at Hannibal’s chest and fiddles with his tie. Morosely, he adds, “This is probably as good as I’m going to feel all day.”

“I’ll be home early tonight.”

“Maybe I won’t be curled up around the toilet again.”

“The peppermint didn’t help?”

Will hums, shaking his head. He undoes the first button on Hannibal’s shirt.

“Ginger root may be more effective,” Hannibal says, guiding Will’s hand back to the bed.

“Do we have that here?”

Will obviously cares very little about the answer. He brushes his foot over Hannibal’s glutes and rests his head back against the pillow, hand wandering down to Hannibal’s fly. Hannibal catches his fingers.

“There should be tea in the cabinet.”

“Hannibal,” Will whispers, tugging Hannibal’s tie askew to pull him in for a kiss. “We’ll be fast.”

“Will, I have—”

“Fifteen minutes.” Will taps on the face of Hannibal’s watch. “You have fifteen minutes.” He kisses Hannibal again, arching his back so their hips press together. He unbuttons Hannibal’s pants and reaches inside. “I’ve felt like my guts were going to explode for the past two weeks. I don’t feel like that now.”

Hannibal sighs, “Fifteen minutes, Will.”

Will wastes no time in pushing Hannibal’s pants out of the way. Before he can get enough of Hannibal’s clothes out of the way, Hannibal pulls him to sit up and then to lie prone on the bed with his feet by the pillows so his left arm still hangs over the edge of the bed.

Will pillows his right arm beneath his head and clutches at the blanket. Hannibal reaches into the side table for lubricant and yanks Will’s shorts down. Fourteen minutes.

Hannibal eases in one slick finger and then another. Will groans and pushes back against him. His left hand clutches at the side of the mattress. He keeps his face pressed into his arm. Hannibal’s tongue breaches him alongside his fingers, and Will swears, arching his back attractively and causing his hips to lift off the bed in the same instant.

Hannibal fumbles with a condom, more for the sake of protecting Will, and slicks up with more of the lubricant. He pushes into Will at last, summoning a diaphragmatic expletive out of both of them. His insides jolt with a pleasant sparking heat. Hannibal settles for a moment to allow Will to adjust but then takes off. They don’t have time.

Will claws at the sheets, frantic and moaning and more desperate than he initially lead Hannibal to believe.

“Say fuck again,” Will gasps.

“Fuck, Will.”

“*Ah,* again.”

“Fuck.”

Hannibal bites his shoulder through his shirt. Will starts to yank it off over the back of his head, but Hannibal tugs it back down.

“Your IV, Will.”

“Damn it.”

Will shimmies his knees forward on the bed so his back bows perfectly from neck to hips. Hannibal clutches at him with one hand and braces himself on the bed with his opposite elbow. Will kisses, nips, and pants hotly on the wrist exposed to him. Hannibal kisses the shell of his ear, the curve of his jaw, and his throat. Will’s skin vibrates under his tongue and lips. Hannibal groans and pounds into him harder.

Hannibal moves his hand from Will’s hip to his dragging erection and squeezes. Will makes a panicked sound and moves into Hannibal’s fist. Hannibal follows that rhythm and rapidly

strokes Will off as orgasm hits him and knocks the wind out of him. Will spills over his fingers, and they both freeze in the pinnacle of their union. Hannibal presses his hips forward slightly, and Will's sphincter wearily constricts around him once before relaxing again.

Will flops unceremoniously onto the bed. Hannibal presses the crown of his head in between Will's shoulder blades and catches his breath. He doesn't need to check his watch to know they have massively overstepped their time constraints. Rather than deal with that unfavorable reality, he buries his face in the nape of Will's neck and breathes.

Will groans and mutters, "Now I do need to wash the sheets."

Hannibal sighs softly and pulls out of him carefully, trying not to add insult to injury and dirty his suit. He says, "You take a shower. I'll handle it."

"You're going to be late."

"Quite."

"I can't even make myself regret it," Will chuckles airily, turning to lay his cheek on the blanket and look at Hannibal over his shoulder.

He leans in and kisses Will gently on his temple. Hannibal whispers, "I know the feeling well."

A few beats of silence drop between them. Will hums and closes his eyes.

"Are you going to be here when I get out?"

"Probably not."

"You really don't want to play hooky with me?"

"Wanting has nothing to do with it, Will." Hannibal runs his hands up and down Will's sides soothingly. "Your being sick has nothing to do with it."

Will starts to turn to the side and eventually rolls over onto his back with some difficulty. He holds his arm above his head so the IV stays clear of the mess on the sheets and on his stomach. Hannibal removes the condom and disposes of it. He tucks himself back into his pants with his clean hand and sits back down beside Will on the bed, twisting a sanitary wipe between his fingers and down his palm.

"How did you get to be like this?"

"Like what, Will?"

"You know, so together; so…refined."

"Refined?" Hannibal smiles; Will smiles, too.

"Don't act like the idea surprises you."

Still smiling, Hannibal murmurs, “It doesn’t.”

“So, how did you?”

“I suppose it could have been boarding school in Paris.”

Will appears to think about it. On a whim, he asks, “Did you have a boyfriend, growing up?”

“I was never in a relationship with a man.” *Before you.*

“But you’ve bottomed.”

“For the experience.”

Hannibal blinks at Will when he laughs. He holds his side with his left hand, and peeved, Hannibal leans over him and flicks his nose. Will finds that hilarious, too.

When he calms down, Hannibal asks, “Did you have a boyfriend, Will?”

“I had two. In college I mostly dated women. People ask fewer questions that way.”

Hannibal touches Will’s knee. He asks, “Do they ask questions now?”

“Not for the reasons they used to. People are curious about you now more than they are about me.”

“People like who?”

“Well, Alana likes to check on me and make sure you’re not being neglectful or immature or petty or…*Hey,*” he exclaims, Hannibal’s teeth nipping the inside of his knee. “You’ve been *all* of those things. You don’t get to be mad.”

“Mad isn’t the word I would choose.”

“Right, peckish, whatever.”

Hannibal frowns and bites him again, more softly. Will smiles and touches Hannibal’s undoubtedly ravaged hair. He is going to be outrageously late, but he makes no move to leave the bed.

“Jack works really hard at putting off like it isn’t a big deal, but he doesn’t really approve.”

“A trifle.”

“No one else really says anything except Katz, and she just wants to make sure I’m okay and that I tell you things.”

“What things?”

Hannibal looks up at Will. He shrugs and looks up at the IV pouch hanging from the stand.

“Like when things get to be too much for me in the field.” They wait in silence for a moment, and Will scratches at his neck. He says, “She’s just looking out for me.”

“Aren’t they all?”

Will glances at Hannibal and drops his gaze to his chest.

“When they find out what I am…” He licks his lips and swallows.

“What you are is sick, Will; what you are is abused by your empathy, by the scenes of death Jack Crawford has exposed you to on a regular basis.”

“What I am is a murderer and a cannibal.” Hannibal catches Will’s eye eventually. He mumbles, “It takes one to know one.”

“They are neither of those things. They won’t know you until it is far too late for them to stop you.”

“Stop me from doing what?”

Hannibal bends down, carefully, and kisses Will on the forehead. He says, “Whatever you want.”

Will’s fingers creep around the back of Hannibal’s neck. He feels the exact moment the docility is replaced with an unveiled threat. Will says, “I told you not to lie to me.”

They watch each other, two beasts of prey.

“Too late to stop me from doing what, Hannibal?”

Hannibal licks his lips and presses them to the corner of Will’s mouth. He lingers there a while, not speaking and horribly, inexcusably late.

“Elevating yourself.”

Will’s eyes are confused, but he seems to understand enough not to question further. He sits up slowly, aided by Hannibal’s hands. They sit for a minute, maybe less. Will maneuvers his feet onto the floor and shakily stands up.

“Have a good day at work.”

“Thank you, Will.”

Hannibal watches him leave the room. Two dogs follow him down the hall toward the bathroom. Hannibal strips the sheet off the bed and loads it into the washer. He replaces it with a clean one from the closet, makes the bed, and quickly tidies up Will’s room so he will not have to navigate through clutter with his IV stand.

He leaves the house with his briefcase, taking a moment to herd the tiny white dog whose name might actually be Maggie back inside after she trots behind him out the front door. He

fixes his hair in the car and pulls out onto the dirt road.

According to the digital clock he is going to be half an hour late. He will need to stay an extra thirty minutes at the end of the day to catch up on paperwork, but he would still be home earlier than on a typical work day. Alana Bloom had requested a consultation with him the previous week for noon today, and he had cleared room in his schedule to make it, which meant fewer actual patient visits. That was something of a relief.

Alana had mentioned Abigail and the girl she befriended, the girl deprived of her speech and of her child. She had mentioned Jack Crawford as well and their visit to the morgue to view Nicholas Boyle's body.

It is a trifle; hardly anything more, though it will be nice to check in on Abigail and perhaps finally meet her mysterious confidante.

Hannibal switches on the radio and smiles at the clarinets calling and answering to the baritones. It is the final movement of Das Lied von der Erde. Compositions by Mahler remind Hannibal of Will. The name, Der Abschied, translates to "The Farewell." He thinks it is appropriate. The time will come for them to part soon; the time will come much later for them to go together. They have some time yet before that day presents itself, but they do not have long.

"Ich stehe hier und harre meines Freundes; Ich harre sein zum letzten Lebewohl."

I stand here and wait for my friend; I wait to bid him a last farewell.

"Ich sehne mich, o Freund, an deiner Seite Die Schönheit dieses Abends zu genießen."

I yearn, my friend, at your side to enjoy the beauty of this evening.

"Wo bleibst du? Du läßt mich lang allein!"

Where do you tarry? You leave me alone for so long!

Hannibal turns onto the freeway and lowers the volume. He doesn't want to hear the rest. He knows it ends much like Persephone's tale, with rebirth and renewal and endless repetition. He knows it ends with eternity.

Chapter End Notes

> "In his arms, my lady lay asleep, wrapped in a veil. He woke her then, and trembling and obedient, she ate that burning heart out of his hand. Weeping, I saw him then depart from me." — Dante Alighieri's first sonnet (La Vita Nuova)
>
> Mixed Berry and Banana Fruit Salad
> http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/mixed_berry_and_banana_fruit_salad/

Bruschetta w/ Tomato and Basil
http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/bruschetta_with_tomato_and_basil/

“Das Lied von der Erde” – Der Abschied by Gustav Mahler and Translated by Hans Bethge
http://www.thomashampson.com/2005/02/19/das-lied-von-der-erde-der-abschied/

In *Red Dragon*, it’s mentioned by Will that Hannibal was sadistic toward animals as a child, but there’s stuff in *Hannibal Rising* that I *think* suggests otherwise (it’s been a while since I read it).

And you know what? Idk if Will could plausibly have gotten it up under the circumstances. I’m just going to say that he had a rare, good morning that got better and leave it at that.

Four Billion Souls

Chapter Summary

Alana and Hannibal talk.

Chapter Notes

One, two, three, four billion souls are gonna rest/If all our friends don't try their best/To change the way this world is headed for

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alana folds her hands in her lap and waits patiently for Nadine to continue. They've made substantial progress on acknowledging her mother's condition: the full extent of her deterioration since the last time Nadine saw the woman. She isn't a crier, so Alana isn't all that surprised by her dry eyes or the blank expression on her face. She's never seen Nadine cry; none of the nurses or orderlies have.

At present, she has been sitting across from Alana in perfect silence ruminating on their talk. It was over two years ago when her mother last came to visit. Alana remembers Nadine mentioned that she seemed like a different person.

Tuesdays are Nadine's days with Alana; they're also Cora Armistead's day for therapy with Dr. Pearce. He hasn't been having any luck, even after the improvements she'd made since befriending Abigail. Part of the reason she had been able to clear her afternoon appointments to consult with Hannibal today was because Dr. Pearce wanted to hear his opinion of Cora Armistead, though she had her own reasons for calling him.

There are fifteen minutes left to their session when Nadine finally speaks again. She says, "I'm worried about Abigail."

The sudden change in conversation is troublesome, but perhaps the topic is more of a concern in itself. Alana controls the muscles in her face and keeps herself from reacting in any way other than to ask, "Why?"

"You know what Cora's like; we both do."

"Cora's never opened up to either of us the way she has with Abigail," Alana replies evenly. "Does that bother you?"

“Cora’s opened up to me before.”

The tone is decidedly one of jealousy, but Alana chooses not to comment on it. She also doesn’t tell her what Abigail never said to her about where her diary actually went; how Oscar found it in the trash can with another person’s writing in a marked page and showed it to Alana the following morning. Nadine would shut down at the first sign of conflict if she knew she was in the wrong; she had never responded well to allegations she couldn’t plausibly deny.

Rather than call her out on what could be a lie but could also be the truth, Alana fills in, “But she doesn’t anymore.”

“Diane bullies her. She bullies everyone, especially anyone who tries to get through to Cora. She’s an easy target because she can’t speak and doesn’t try to.”

“She’s making more of an effort now, not just to talk with Abigail but to talk to the doctors and nurses on staff.”

“Well, good for her to buck up for once.” Nadine rolls her eyes and crosses her arms. “Do you ever stop and think about what she could be *telling* Abigail when they sit together for breakfast or in the library?”

“I trust Abigail’s judgment. Her private conversations aren’t any of my business.”

“Do you hear yourself? Her father was a *murdering cannibal*. He killed girls that looked like her and her mom, too. The cops are still trying to figure out if she had anything to do with it. You really trust her *judgment?*”

“It’s an ongoing investigation, Nadine. You know I can’t talk to you about it.”

“I’m just saying maybe Cora isn’t a good influence. That thought must have crossed your mind at some point. I mean, what happened out there in the woods when that guy took her? They were gone for months doing God knows what. No one even knows what kind of things he brainwashed her with while they were out there worshipping the devil and killing horses.”

“Nadine.”

“I know what I sound like,” she mutters, calming down. She sighs, “I know what I sound like, okay? I *know*.”

“When was the last time you had contact with either Abigail or Cora?”

“I haven’t since they got all chummy.”

“Why not?”

“Because…” Nadine wrenches her hands in her lap. Reluctantly, she says, “Cora probably told her that I…You know how I sometimes don’t tell the truth.”

Alana can see it now. Maybe there is jealousy, but the primary agitation for Nadine is that she's alienated herself with her own compulsions for dishonesty. It would be a harsh awakening for anyone; it probably also explains, though it doesn't justify, what she wrote in Abigail's diary.

"Old habits die hard."

"So do old dreams," Nadine says, turning her head to look out the window adjacent to the bookcase. She never quite looks her age when she's sitting still and robbed of her height, but today she looks much older. It must be the worry lines around her mouth and creased across her forehead. "Huntington's chorea hits in your thirties, right?"

Nadine recently celebrated twenty-five.

"Not really worth the time it would take to fix all the problems I have."

"If your mother passed it onto you—"

"She did."

"There's a fifty-fifty chance that you don't have it—"

"But I do." Nadine's jaw is set. "I told you my father never wanted to have me tested, but that was…" She chuckles without humor, lightly shaking her head. "Well, I lied."

Alana sits and stares at Nadine's profile. It could easily be a lie on top of a lie, a double bluff; it wouldn't be the first time. Rather than acknowledge it, Alana does what she must do in order to further another response out of Nadine. She asks her, "Did you see the results for yourself?"

"He showed them to me." Nadine looks down and scratches at the back of her neck. "He used to say it was okay to do what he did because I was broken anyway."

"You aren't broken, Nadine."

"Maybe I wasn't, before." She rubs her hands together and glances at the clock beside the door. "And maybe I'm not now, but…I give it, what, ten years before everything falls apart? What's the best anyone can really hope for with damaged goods?"

Alana doesn't answer. Huntington's chorea begins to take effect between the mid-thirties and forties. Even if Nadine is lying now, she is sure to know that much already.

"It'd be different if I could take someone with me on my way down; less lonely, less horrible."

"Who would you take with you?"

Nadine's voice wobbles, and her eyes shine. She takes a deep breath and says, "My mom, I guess. She's going that way already; we should be able to go together."

“Do you think it would be a mercy?”

“There’s no way to know anymore what she feels.” She rubs her chin with her hand. “It might make everything worse for all I know.”

“Would you want to take her with you if she wasn’t sick and if you still were?”

“Like if I’d gotten it from my dad instead of from her?” Nadine thinks about it for a long time, eyeing the clock again. “I’d want to, but…” She shrugs, and the smile on her face is a mask, a carefully constructed veil. “I don’t think I could do that to someone I hated, much less the only—the only one I have left.” Nadine sighs to cover the hitches in her breathing.

Nadine stands, and the daunting size of her completes the feeble façade and steels it. She says, “Time’s up, Dr. Bloom.”

Alana stands mechanically and sees Nadine out at ten fifty nine. She quickly tidies up her office and then sits at her desk to amend her notes in Nadine’s file. She lists her progress accepting her mother’s condition and the repercussions of her dishonesty toward others. She doesn’t record her concerns about Abigail or Cora Armistead. She thinks a while on it but ultimately dismisses it as circumstantial.

Nadine Dufort has been known to sensationalize small things and make them out to be scandalous where they really aren’t, but nothing about Abigail can really be sensationalized beyond the point where she’s at already. Her fear for Abigail’s safety is sensible and perfectly logical. The only thing that really confuses Alana is her timing.

Nothing had changed with Abigail apart from whatever else Alana learned from her during their sessions or from the group psychiatrist’s notes. She seemed fine; some days she seemed better. Usually if Hannibal or Will called Alana could tell just be looking at her; Will called more frequently since he was taking off from cases and from teaching. She had come to seek shelter in her relationship with them. Alana has conflicting opinions about their involvement in her life, but their influence appears to be positive, and Abigail would be all alone without them, though now she has Cora, too.

Nadine doesn’t have anyone; her abusive father currently serves time in prison, and her ailing mother serves time of her own in a hospital. Alana wonders if Abigail could have turned out like Nadine if she had been left alone in this place with no family and no friends, worsening because she could never get passed the walls set up in her head.

She doesn’t have any more time to think about it by the time Hannibal arrives exactly at noon. Alana greets him when he knocks on the door to her office, and they walk into the room together. They have met at Hannibal’s practice in the past, but he has been asked to meet with Cora during his visit today, and that option isn’t possible outside of Port Haven. He sounded interested enough in the prospect; Abigail had probably mentioned her to him at some point.

Alana mainly wants Hannibal’s advice regarding potential trauma Abigail may have suffered as a result of Jack’s indelicate methods. Abigail is a bright girl; she can be as manipulative and self-controlled as she deems necessary to any given situation, but Alana still doesn’t

know why. She doesn't know if Abigail would let her know if she had been traumatized, but Abigail trusts Hannibal, and Hannibal knows her in a different light than Alana does. What she's really hoping to achieve from their visit today is perspective, maybe some clarity, and of course, an evaluation of Cora Armistead.

"Thank you for making the time to come up here," she says as she closes the door behind him.

He nods congenially and hangs his coat by the door. He says, "I wouldn't miss the opportunity to consult with you, Dr. Bloom."

Of course with the formalities.

She smiles and gestures for him to sit in one of the chairs by the window towards which Abigail typically gravitates during their sessions. She sits opposite him and looks outside, following his gaze to the pair sitting below on the steps facing away from them; a blonde and a brunette, Cora and Abigail.

"She played the system and the dean to keep her friend," Alana remarks distantly. She watches Cora's hands move and notes how Abigail's mimic the signs when Cora is finished.

Hannibal asks, "To keep her friend or to make her friend happy?"

Alana smiles at his suggestion and says, "Honestly, probably both. I admire her diligence, but her behavior at the time was inadvisable at best. She's lucky it was only Cora Armistead she had to fight for."

"One friend can make all the difference," Hannibal says amicably. "I suspect Cora Armistead will be enough of a victory to satisfy Abigail for a while." Hannibal brings his eyes to Alana's and smiles. He adds, "Has Cora benefitted from Abigail's friendship as Abigail has?"

He hadn't asked if Abigail had benefitted in any way, but he had probably heard it in her voice and seen it in the set of her shoulders where she sits unaware of their eyes outside. Abigail enjoys Cora's presence; enjoys having someone inside the facility walls to sit and talk with. Before Abigail received the green light with Cora, that person used to be Nadine Dufort.

Alana thinks about the change she has seen in Cora since Abigail went out on a limb just to speak to her. The withdrawn, self-conscious young woman had reinvented herself or more than that, had reclaimed the person she once was back when Alana first met her. She had recaptured a light long lost from her eyes and a smile long separated from her face.

"Cora has been making more of an effort to communicate with the doctors on staff."

"Has she made an effort to communicate with you?"

"Professionally, no. She has enough doctors poking into her files and fumbling to get inside her head, especially now that she's begun to give them something to work with. On the record, Dr. Pearce hasn't asked me to see her yet."

Tilting his head to one side and smiling knowingly, Hannibal asks, “And off the record?”

Alana sighs and says, “Off the record, it’s still a challenge trying to understand her. She and Abigail have a system that works for them, but it isn’t standardized or even logical. Abigail just knows how to read her.”

Hannibal leans back in his seat and nonchalantly recites, “Speechless complainer, I will learn thy thought; in thy dumb action will I be as perfect as begging hermits in their holy prayers: thou shalt not sigh, nor hold thy stumps to heaven, nor wink, nor nod, nor kneel, nor make a sign, but I of these will wrest an alphabet and by still practice, learn to know thy meaning.”

“Titus Andronicus,” Alana observes.

“Humans communicate in so many ways,” Hannibal says, getting to his feet and buttoning his suit jacket. “Cora Armistead has gone a long time without reaching out to anyone, a tortured Lavinia with no one there to craft an alphabet for the purpose of learning her mind.”

She watches Hannibal look out the window and moves to stand at his shoulder. Abigail makes an exaggerated sign below, and Cora covers her mouth with one hand and hunches over to laugh. Alana catches herself smiling.

Psychiatrically, she is interested in Hannibal’s opinion of Cora Armistead. Even before the dean officially sought after his two cents, she wondered if he might notice something in her, if he would be able to pick through the language barrier the way no one else but Abigail could even with the use of written words.

Abigail won’t talk about Cora outside of what they had for breakfast or the new word she learned to sign the day before. If by some miracle, Hannibal could get through to her, she would go so far as to propose a referral, even if the dean decided, for whatever reason, that he didn’t want to go that far.

“On the phone you said you wished to discuss Abigail,” Hannibal says, glancing over his shoulder to lock eyes with Alana.

She sighs, “Jack had her look at Nick Boyle’s body.”

Hannibal looks down, nods once, and raises his chin again. Quietly, he says, “He still questions her innocence.”

“Yes,” Alana murmurs, watching him. She doesn’t tell him what she told Jack; that while she might have reservations about Abigail, they don’t extend to Hannibal. “I’m concerned that it may have done more harm than good, exposing her to his body like that.”

“There was good that came of it?” Hannibal asks, a dull bite to his words. He seems to hear it, too, and revises, more evenly, “However much I disagree with his methods, I am sure Jack believed he was doing the right thing.”

It’s a loaded claim to make. She thinks about Will mucking up the Beth LeBeau crime scene; she thinks about how he attacked Casson in Williamsport and Hannibal had to intervene just

to snap him out of whatever the hell it was that got to him. He's right to disagree with Jack, but she knows he's also right to give him the benefit of the doubt, even if the evidence does cry out against the man at times.

Abigail stands up outside and brushes the backs of her legs before turning around with Cora at her side. She happens to glance up at the window and squints slightly before waving. Hannibal smiles and lifts his hand. Cora ducks her head and looks at Abigail questioningly. Down below, Abigail explains something to Cora.

After a long moment of consideration, Cora raises her eyes to the window and offers a timid smile that Alana can only just make out from their distance on the second floor. If Hannibal is surprised, he doesn't show it. He lifts his hand to his temple and salutes with his palm facing outward, a hand sign, in all likelihood. Cora sees it and recognizes it; her smile widens, and she repeats the gesture.

Abigail grins at her, and they go on their way, Cora's eyes lingering a while on Hannibal. He pockets his hand and steps away from the window. Alana waits a moment longer before following Hannibal to the corner of the room where the statuette of Pegasus stands.

"Abigail is not my patient, but she trusts me," Hannibal says, eyeing the winged horse and stepping around the side of it. "You believe Cora Armistead will show the same level of trust."

"If she did, it could only help her, Hannibal. And," Alana begins, wondering if this next point, however accurate, will be a low blow. "If she were to finally receive proper help and treatment, it would make Abigail happy."

Hannibal turns then, an amused arch in his eyebrows and a smile dancing on his lips. He looks back again to the Pegasus and runs his forefinger down the feathered tips of the horse's wings. He says, "I was under the assumption that Cora Armistead was the peripheral subject in this consultation."

"Unofficially, yes." Alana steps around him and walks toward the Cézanne by the door. "Officially, Pearce asked me for a fresh set of eyes and ears to look into her case, and…" She looks over her shoulder to find him standing with his hands in his pockets a few steps away, eyes on the bookshelf. She didn't hear him moving through the room. "I told him you were the best therapist I know."

Hannibal comes around to stand beside her and look upon the still life painting of the basket and fruit. Hannibal's back is straight, and his hair is immaculate, though there's a smattering of dog hair on one of his pant legs that monumentally piques her interest; he must be staying with Will in Wolf Trap while he's recuperating.

She knows their discussion will become immersive and professional in a matter of minutes, so she takes her chance to ask while it's still available to her: "How is Will doing?"

Hannibal isn't surprised by her question. They are quite obviously out and paired off. Even if their relationship wasn't a fact of life by this point in time, Alana knows Hannibal wouldn't

be bothered by her inquiry. Will is her friend, and Hannibal is a trusted colleague and mentor. They've talked about saucier, more personal things.

"He is recovering. It will take some time before he will be adjusted enough to enter back into his work with Jack Crawford."

He says Jack's name almost disdainfully, and Alana knows why.

"Has he considered that he might be better off just teaching?"

Hannibal sighs softly and turns to sit in the chair where Alana sat just an hour ago during her session with Nadine. She sits across from him and waits for his response.

"He won't listen to reason."

"Well, Jack can be persuasive when he wants to be. Maybe Will wants to quit but feels pressured into staying."

"He saves lives," Hannibal says easily. "To him, they are more important than whatever trauma he may suffer trying to find them."

"You've already asked him not to go back," Alana concludes.

"Yes." Hannibal crosses his legs. "After Lawrence Wells and his totem pole of bodies, he came to me, distressed." She watches his throat bob once with a swallow. "I asked him why he refused Jack's offer to leave the field. He told me it felt good to save lives."

Alana leans forward and says, "You've saved lives."

"I have also lost them. Will has, too."

Alana wonders if she might pay a visit to Will to see how he's doing but reasons that separation from his work might be the best thing for him, at least until he decides he's ready to come back. It's amazing he chose to take time off at all; she suspects Hannibal is the one to thank for convincing him to concede to a break from the ugly mayhem Jack's killers subject him to week in and week out.

"We can discuss Will at a later time when our focus is less divided," Hannibal offers in favor of getting back on track with their consultation, which is less a consultation than it is two people talking in an office.

Alana had suggested that Pearce consult with Hannibal himself to get a feel for the man, but he had insisted she be the one to bring him up to speed on Cora's current situation. She sighs and says, "What do you know about Cora Armistead?"

"Five years ago, a man named Anson Huxley abducted her from this facility and took her to Devil's Den Nature Preserve in Weston, Connecticut. Police found them several months later; at the time of hospitalization, Miss Armistead was discovered to be with child. It could never be confirmed whether the sex acts that led to conception were forced upon her or if they were consensual.

“She refused to testify at court, which aroused much speculation as to the true nature of their relationship. It was suspected on the prosecution’s side that she was, in fact, a part of his kidnapping scheme. The one flaw in their theory, of course, was the fact of her absent tongue. It could not be proven either whether she had bitten it off or if Huxley had, though the police claimed in their reports that she had been the one to mutilate herself.

“Huxley was swiftly imprisoned and committed suicide immediately following the birth of his son, Noah Armistead. To my knowledge, the boy lives with his grandmother.”

“You followed the case?”

“It was interesting,” Hannibal says with a small smile. “When Abigail mentioned her for the first time, I looked into it again to refresh my memory. I have read a little since our discussion on the phone last week.”

“What would you say about her so far?”

“Without having spoken to her, I could only guess.” She nods for him to continue, so he does: “Prior to meeting Abigail, she would have been lonely, indifferent to the attempts of others to reach out to her. Abigail is different; she’s been touched by death; she’s lived with it and walked with it, been loved by it.”

“Her father.”

“Yes,” Hannibal says with a curt nod of his head. “Cora Armistead sees Abigail as a reflection of herself: a victim and a survivor. Abigail is special because circumstances that were out of her control brought her here.”

“Cora was here two years before the kidnapping.”

“Would she have stayed five years more if it had never happened?”

Alana thinks about it; she thinks about how different Cora was five years ago. Five years is such a long time to be locked away. It’s such a long time for a mind to be changed. She was in the woods with Anson Huxley for five months, and her life flipped upside down.

“Cora Armistead suffered the attention of a man far gone with limerence and satanic delusions. Whatever happened in the woods, it’s the reason you haven’t released her to her mother and child. You want to know what Anson Huxley did to her, if he corrupted her or if she truly was his victim in every sense of the word.”

“Do you think she would tell if she knew?”

“She knows.”

“Then why not tell?”

“Perhaps it isn’t enough she lost pieces of herself to a madman. Perhaps she knows she is better protected in silence. No one will question her innocence that way, if she remains crystallized in a moment of intense fear and pain.”

Even if he hadn't already painted the obvious parallels between Cora and Abigail, Alana would have seen this one. She says, "She and Abigail are in the same place."

"They each wear a scar. They hide them in similar ways: Abigail with a scarf and Cora with silence."

"I wanted to bring her up here to meet you. If it's all right, I'd like to sit in?" Alana asks over her shoulder as she walks behind her desk.

"Of course, and if it would make her more comfortable, allow her to bring Abigail with her."

Alana dials a number on the phone and gets Diane in the lobby. She asks for Trudy, and grumbling, Diane hands off the phone.

"Trudy, could you bring Cora Armistead and Abigail Hobbs to my office?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll just be a minute. Is that doctor in?"

"Yes, Trudy."

"Well, I hope everything turns out okay, Dr. Bloom. I'll get the girls up there right quick."

Alana smiles and says, "Thank you."

She hangs up the phone and rounds the desk again. Hannibal is rearranging the furniture around the window nearest to her desk to accommodate for more people. She asks, "How did you know they'd prefer to sit here and not by the door?"

"This window overlooks the top of the wall," Hannibal says easily. He straightens out. "Abigail has climbed over the wall in the past; she associates this window with freedom and the other with a return back into Port Haven."

"And Cora will respond in kind." Alana nods, rearranging the table with Hannibal's help. He notices her smiling and cocks his head to one side slightly. She muses, "You've never seen her in this room, but you know her well enough to pick out her favorite spot."

"Abigail is very open with me; not difficult to imagine the way she thinks."

"Kind of like Will with…oh, everyone."

He smiles at the comparison—even beams a little bit. She wants to snap a picture before it fades, but he knows himself well enough to know when he's being obvious. He looks away, though she can see it still, maybe even better, in profile.

"You know, I was worried for a while that I was going to have to punch you in the face."

Hannibal turns, surprised. A diminished version of the same look from before sits happily on his face. He looks entertained, and while she's glad of it, she means business.

He says, "Because I left him at the hospital following his car accident."

“Because you left him alone, and he was devastated.”

The look falls from his face in degrees until his face is a mask like the one Nadine wore. There are cracks in it that probably wouldn’t be there if they were talking about anyone else, but it’s Will. It’s Will, and he can’t hide from her what their relationship, what being close to Will, has done to him.

Subtly, he’s become the man with dog hair on his thousand dollar suits; the man who can’t stomach the thought of a girl he has no blood ties with exposed to any more death than she has already witnessed at such a young age; he’s become the man who researches that girl’s only friend in all the world out of curiosity and a need to protect that he didn’t mention but is clear on his face. It’s the same look he gets when talking about Will’s work with the FBI.

“Do you know why he drove home in such a hurry that night?”

She shakes her head no but then remembers Will had given her bits of information.

“He said you gave him an out and he took it.”

Hannibal looks down, thinking. He nods his head and murmurs, “Which is why he told me to leave the hospital.”

“But that’s not *why* he was in a hurry.” She considers his words. “And it’s not why you left the hospital.” He shakes his head no. She goes to ask why, but the knock at the door interrupts her before she can get the words out. She moves to open it and finds Trudy with Cora and Abigail standing in front of her, one shoulder in each of her round palms.

She smiles and hands them off, turning without another word and leaving them to their business. Alana’s glad Trudy’s name was cleared from the diary incident. It would have been a shame to tarnish her name with someone else’s trouble.

“Come in, Cora, Abigail.”

Cora ducks in first, followed by Abigail and next by Alana. Abigail walks at Cora’s side, though she is visibly happy to see Hannibal. She only strays to give Cora room to shake his hand when he extends it to her.

“My name is Hannibal Lecter.”

She holds a letter C with her left hand and turns it gently from side to side.

“Cora Armistead. Abigail has told me good things about you.”

Cora smiles and sits when Abigail does on the edge of the chaise lounge. Alana sits in one of the chairs, and Hannibal follows after. She hums, catching everyone’s attention and points at Hannibal. She holds her hand with her fingers spread apart and taps her thumb on her forehead. Hannibal smiles and shakes his head. Her eyebrows knit downward once, and she repeats the sign to Abigail who touches her scarf self-consciously, recognizing the word *father*.

“Perhaps someday, Miss Armistead.”

She sets her hands in her lap, understanding. Reconsidering, she raises her hands again in the form of two OK signs and circles them in opposite directions so her pinky fingers touch. Hannibal nods his head and says, “Yes.”

“Hannibal’s been there for me since I woke up in the hospital.”

Alana notes with interest that Abigail calls him by first name now. She’s both endeared and alarmed at the progression of their relationship. Hannibal doesn’t react to the lack of the official title.

Abigail says, “I told Cora about you and Will, I hope that’s okay.”

Cora smiles at the mention of Will’s name. She pats her side with the palm of her hand and pulls away to snap her fingers.

“Will’s dogs,” Hannibal says. She nods and points at Hannibal’s furry pant leg. He looks down, and his shoulders deflate just a little bit. “Ah, yes.”

That defeated admission earns him a small laugh from Cora, through closed lips and muffled behind her hand. Alana wonders if it wasn’t intentional on Hannibal’s part. Maybe he knew Cora would have heard about the dogs and that she would be delighted in the evidence of his connection to them. He smiles small, and Alana thinks it makes more sense that he would have done it on purpose than by accident.

“Did you ever have pets, Cora?”

She nods, points to her mouth, and flicks her fingers out twice. He says, “A lizard.”

Cora’s mouth falls open as if to elaborate but then snaps shut, remembering. She sighs and rapidly spells out a word. Hannibal gets it after the first few letters, but he lets her finish spelling before he answers, “A chameleon.”

She spells something else out, and this time Abigail says it aloud: “Germaine.”

“A good name; it begs for a sibling.” Cora sneaks a tiny smile and lays her palm against her chest. “No brothers or sisters?” She shakes her head, the tiny smile still on her face. She points her finger at him in question. Abigail looks at Alana and then at Hannibal; Alana looks at him, too.

“A sister,” he says quietly. “Mischa.”

She supposes that makes sense, though she figured she would have heard about a sister if he was involved in her life. A man like Hannibal definitely would have been. Judging from his silence and from Abigail’s somber expression, she can fill in the blanks.

Cora makes a gesture with her left hand as if she were dribbling a basketball. Hannibal shakes his head no. She swallows and glances at Abigail. She nods, and Cora signs four letters that Alana guesses at: *Noah.*

“Your son with Anson Huxley.” Cora, to her credit, doesn’t flinch. “When was the last time you spoke with him?” She holds her fists together and points over her left shoulder. Hannibal translates, “Last year.”

Alana remembers Mrs. Armistead bringing the energetic child to Port Haven around Christmastime. She asks, “He turned four in February, isn’t that right?”

Cora smiles sadly and nods.

“I imagine you want to be with him again more than anything,” Hannibal says gently. She looks out the window, and Alana notes Abigail’s hand on her arm. “Does he look like his father?”

Cora hums in the affirmative and looks down. A single tear drops straight down from her eye lashes onto her thigh.

“If you feel comfortable,” Hannibal leans forward slightly. He catches Cora’s eye and then continues, “I would like to speak to you in private. Dr. Bloom?”

“If it’s okay with you, Cora.”

She looks, and Cora nods, smiling at Abigail’s encouraging expression. Alana and Abigail quietly leave the room and sit in the hall. Abigail heaves a heavy sigh and holds her hands behind her head. Alana asks what’s wrong.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Abigail laughs. “Do you think they’ll let Hannibal be her doctor if everything goes okay?”

“Do you think she would respond well to therapy with him?”

“They had a conversation. It’s more than she does with all the nurses combined over the course of a week. She told him about Noah, about Anson.”

Abigail’s excited, and just like before, it’s both endearing and alarming. Alana says, “She’s become really important to you.”

Abigail pauses, catches herself, and looks away. She says, “It just went so much better in there than I thought it would.”

“Did you think she wouldn’t open up to him?”

“Yeah,” she sighs again and leans her elbows onto her knees. “I was worried she would hold back the way she does sometimes.”

“You do that.” Alana takes a moment to appreciate the half-stunned expression on Abigail’s face. She repeats Hannibal’s words: “You think you’re better protected in silence.”

“I’m—”

The door opens. Cora stands at Hannibal's side. He holds the side of the door in one hand; the fingers of his other hand are curled around Cora's shoulder. She smiles at Abigail and makes eye contact with Alana briefly before stepping out of the room. Alana catches Cora's arm and takes her aside while Abigail goes to stand with Hannibal. They talk in hushed tones. She doesn't try to follow what they're saying to each other.

"How do you like Dr. Lecter, Cora?"

She points to her chest, pinches her shirt with her middle finger and thumb, and points at Hannibal. Alana guesses, "You like him?" Cora nods with a small smile on her face. Alana takes a leap and says, "If I could arrange it, how would you feel about having him for a therapist?"

She points again at Hannibal as if for clarification. Alana nods and notices Cora's straight teeth when she smiles. It's the first time, she thinks, that she's ever seen Cora smile with her teeth.

"Can we go, Dr. Bloom?" Abigail asks, coming back to Cora's side. She nods and lets them walk down the hall together. She turns back to Hannibal and steps inside the office again, pulling the door closed behind her.

"She likes you," Alana dares to say.

"Yes, she told me," Hannibal admits smilingly. "She's in the habit of being treated like glass."

The realization hits Alana. She says, "Will is, too."

"I don't treat him like glass; it would be folly to treat Cora Armistead that way."

"She wants you to be her therapist."

"Does she?" He watches Alana, and she gives, not really wanting to conceal her opinion from him anyway.

"So do I," she says. "She isn't getting the proper help from the doctors here. If I have to campaign and petition to get her to your practice every week, I'll do it."

"I hardly think you will have to resort to such drastic measures. Abigail has proven already that Dr. Pearce may be swayed by simple reasoning. You need only convince him that Cora will benefit from change."

"You're okay with this?"

"It is as you said," he says good-naturedly. "It will make Abigail happy."

Alana feels herself blushing and forces it down. She says, "I'm sorry about that. I wasn't trying to pressure you."

“Of course not.” He glances at his watch and shrugs on his jacket. “Cora Armistead is an interesting young woman. You may inform Dr. Pearce that I’ll fax my preliminary findings by this evening.”

“Thank you, Hannibal.”

He looks at her, slows down in his movements, and eventually drops his arms to his sides. He turns his eyes to the Whistler over Alana’s shoulder, *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket.* Hannibal is silent for a long time, and she thinks to show him out but doesn’t. She can tell, after a moment of studying his face, that he is trying to say something.

“It was because I couldn’t tell him I loved him.” He presses through the wrinkles in the front of his coat with the palms of his hands. He doesn’t look up. “Why he left, why he told me to leave him at the hospital, and why I did.”

She remembers Will’s words on their way to his house: *I’m in love with him.*

Will had sounded so defeated when he said it; like he hadn’t wanted to admit it but didn’t even realize he felt it until the moment he said it out loud. Slowly, she says, “It’s understandable to be afraid of getting close to people, Hannibal.”

“He deserved better than that, than what I gave him.” He looks away from the painting to make eye contact once with Alana and then clears his throat. The topic is crushed as easily as that. He says, “I will phone Dr. Pearce later in the afternoon and let him know how the meet-up went. Don’t trouble yourself with the details.”

“She’s not your patient yet, Hannibal,” she says, plastering a kind smile on her face that she feels but not to the extent that the smile suggests. “I can carry some of the weight until the matter is finalized.”

“I leave you at the mercy of your own discretion then.” He ducks his head, and she goes with him to the door and down to the lobby. It’s drizzling outside.

Eyes on the rain-soaked parking lot, she asks, “Do you think it’ll ever stop raining?”

Without any detectable traces of sarcasm in his words, Hannibal replies, “The winds will turn the water to ice, and the sun will melt that, too, until we find ourselves here again asking the same question; six months to reap the harvest and six months to suffer the cold.”

Picking up on his allusion, Alana says, “Persephone must be going down to Hades right around now.”

Hannibal looks at her, entertained. He says, “He’ll be happy to receive her.”

Alana stands in the lobby for a few minutes longer after Hannibal leaves. She watches the rain fall and thinks of Demeter, Persephone’s mother, cursing the lands with a frost to mark her daughter’s departure. She thinks about Hades, her daughter’s rightful husband, welcoming her home after six months alone in a place he can’t stand to be in. Alana thinks about it, and then she returns to her office to call Dr. Pearce.

Hannibal’s right about him. He’ll be easy to persuade.

Chapter End Notes

Titus Andronicus by my home boy, Billy Shakespeare (or Edward de Vere, depending on whom you ask)

Crawling King Snake

Chapter Summary

Will has a moderately quiet day in.

Chapter Notes

I'm the Crawlin' King Snake, and I rule my den/Yeah, don't mess 'round with my mate/Gonna use her for myself

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack calls him at four, a moderately safe hour in the day well before Hannibal gets home from work. He calls, and he has the grace to sound embarrassed for seeking Will's counsel while he's on break. Granted, this Tuesday does mark two and a half weeks. He has the time saved up to afford it, but it's still pretty ostentatious, especially for him. In his defense, he is dating a doctor now. He could be forgiven for taking his sick days a little too seriously if it was at the request, well, demand, of a certain concerned physician.

"Will, it's Jack."

Will yawns and asks, "I have caller ID, Jack. How's the case going?"

"Peachy." There's a slight pause like Jack is considering his next words carefully. He says, "I think Georgia Madchen might come after you."

"What, because she killed Sutcliffe?" The question tastes foul in his mouth. Georgia didn't kill him; it's an outright lie.

"You said it yourself at the scene that maybe she thought he was you, and that was what drove her to kill him."

"What motivates her to kill is that she can't see faces. If she did come looking for me it wouldn't be to kill me; she only killed Beth LeBeau because she didn't recognize her."

"Then that puts you and Dr. Lecter both in danger."

Will flares up at the insinuation that someone might threaten Hannibal's safety. Jack's right, and he's not saying it to be cruel.

Jack's right, and he's not saying it to be cruel, Will chants to himself internally. He kneads his temples with the thumb and fingers of his left hand and grips the phone a little bit tighter. *Jack's right, and he's not saying it to be cruel.*

"Will, did you hear me?"

He snaps out of it, something Hannibal said the week before about steroid psychosis reverberating in his head. Apparently, he didn't need to be on the corticosteroids for very long to experience those sorts of side effects, though he had dealt with one incident of ictus on Saturday. Hannibal had been home for that, luckily.

Will clears his throat and asks, "What did you say?"

Jack sighs and repeats himself: "I want to send a protective detail to your house. I assume Dr. Lecter's staying with you?"

"Jack Crawford making assumptions," Will mutters distastefully. Before Jack can fire back with an equally petulant, and fully warranted, attitude, Will says, "He's here. Well, now he's at work, but he'll be back in a few hours." He glances at his IV stand and makes a face. He can't be seen hooked up to the immunoglobulin. "I don't think we need a patrol guarding the house, Jack. Georgia's obviously pretty crafty at sneaking around."

"Are you saying my guys wouldn't be able to catch her?"

"On her way out, I'm sure they'd do just fine."

"Do you think I do this dance with you because it's cute, Will? I care about your safety; Dr. Lecter's, too. Hell, I wanted you to take this time off. Let me do my job."

"What is your job, Jack? Protecting me?"

"It's what I signed on for, yes. It comes with bringing you into the field. I cover you eighty percent, and that's my responsibility."

"What's the margin of error for that?" Jack is silent on the other line. Will tones it down a bit, calling the cheap shot for what it is. He sighs and rubs at his forehead with his hand. "You kill me, Jack."

"I don't follow you."

"Yes, you do," Will mumbles, sitting down at the kitchen table and pinching the bridge of his nose. "You're hoping she'll come here looking for me so you can make the arrest, easy as pie."

"I'm not *hoping* anything, Will, but you know how likely it is that she might seek you out. If Dr. Lecter's staying with you, then that puts him in harm's way right there with you."

"We can take care of ourselves."

“Do you hear how naïve and selfish you—all right, Will, look. Georgia Madchen carved up her best friend’s face until she drowned in her own blood; she nearly decapitated Dr. Sutcliffe at the jaw. She’s taking it farther, becoming more violent; do you really want to face off with someone who doesn’t even have the fear of death to stop her?”

“Uh, wait, say that again?” Jack mutters a curse under his breath, and Will rephrases his question: “No, I mean. You said she nearly decapitated Dr. Sutcliffe.”

“Zeller’s words, not mine.”

“Right, but…”

The nuances that separate Hannibal’s mimicked kills from those of the original murderers’ carry an elegance to them. He could echo Hobbs before anyone even knew the man’s identity, and here he had mimicked Georgia Madchen spotlessly enough that Jack and the team don’t have a clue. The answer’s right in front of him, but Jack doesn’t take the bait and fill in Will’s thought; they’re safe, for the moment.

“But what, Will?”

“Oh, um, no, nothing. Forget I said anything; I’m just…I was thinking.”

“What about?”

He comes up with a quick and easy lie: “If you sent a protective detail out here, she’d just get spooked and run. She probably wouldn’t come after me again if she saw that you were waiting for her.”

“So you want to be the bait all by yourself with no back-up. I’d say that’s brave, Will, but it just sounds stupid to me.”

“All I have to do is convince her that she’s alive and that I’m with her. That’s all Beth LeBeau had to do.”

Another short silence flits between them. Softly, Jack says, “You were rattled at the crime scene. You got closer to Georgia Madchen than you meant to.” Will waits, and eventually Jack continues. “Did Beth LeBeau even have the chance to prove who she really was?”

“Neither of them did.”

“How do you know?”

“They were afraid; they both thought they were dead already.”

Jack hesitates for a beat and asks, “When do you think you’ll come back to Quantico, Will?”

He sighs silently and looks again to the IV taped to the back of his hand. He hadn’t planned on reducing doses until next week. He’d had zero hallucinations since last week, almost immediately after they started treatment. He means to really let into Hannibal as soon as he

feels less like his bones will drop out of his body and like his insides will burst if he's pushed too roughly.

His silence reminds him to speak. He says, "Honestly, I have no idea, Jack."

Reluctant to accept the indefinite terms but genuinely, surprisingly supportive, Jack says, "Well, you take whatever time you need."

Will is touched. Ordinarily, Jack would have ordered him out of bed and back to work a week ago. He had screwed up pretty monumentally, though, and he supposes huge mistakes merit wider berths of clemency. Also, there were Hannibal and Alana for him to contend with; Alana generally prefers Will out of harm's way, and Hannibal, well, he has something far more elaborate planned that Will can't say he's entirely sold on just yet.

"And by that, you mean…" Will trails off.

"You were right at the crime scene," Jack concedes. He isn't partial to admitting it, but something is pushing him to. It could be that he feels guilty about Will's mental dissonance; oh, if only he knew the half of it. "No one does it better than you do, Will; not the way you do it and not as close to the cuff as you do it."

Will chuckles, "So get up off my ass and come back to work pronto?"

Relieved, Jack laughs, too. He says, "Pretty much, yes." Another brief silence shifts between them; this one is comfortable. "Are you okay, Will?"

"I feel better than I did."

"Well, good."

"Oh, yeah, it's great."

"You know…"

"You don't have to say it."

"Say what?"

"What you were about to say: Dr. Lecter *is* good for you." He smirks at his pretty decent impersonation of Jack's concerned voice. Jack huffs on the other line.

"I won't say it then if I don't have to."

"You could say the other thing, if you want."

"I'd rather ask how the hell you're reading my mind over the phone."

"You project a lot when you're about to apologize."

"What am I about to apologize for?"

“It defeats the purpose of an apology if I tell you what you’re sorry for.”

“It’s a bit redundant asking to hear it if you already know what I’m going to say.”

“I don’t, though.” Will swallows, a little more than mildly surprised to find that Jack’s response actually matters a hell of a lot to him.

“I’ve been inconsiderate and insensitive about your relationship with Dr. Lecter,” Jack says slowly, stepping delicately around landmines. “It’s nothing to do with your preferences; you should know that I don’t mind whatever you do on your own time. It’s just…he was your doctor, and one wonders how these things come about.” He adds quickly, “Not that it’s any of my business.”

“Well, you’re right. It’s not.” Will sits back in his chair, mulling over the possibilities for where Jack might have decided to have this conversation. He could be alone in the morgue or taking a minute in the hall outside the conference room. He could be in the break room or in the restroom shouting at everyone who comes knocking to leave. Maybe it’s because he’s been cooped up all day, but to confide a little bit in Jack, give him a line of something to keep him interested, and to open his now receptive mind; it’s an opportunity Hannibal certainly wouldn’t pass up. “It started in Williamsport, after Casson.”

“He told me when you had the seizure.”

“Yeah, well, he was telling the truth.”

“Lucky for him,” Jack says seriously. Will laughs, and he asks, “Was it because he woke you up?”

“It was because he…” Will stands and shuffles around the kitchen looking for the ginger tea Hannibal said they had. He’s careful not to move out of range of his IV stand so the wheels don’t squeak and alert Jack to its existence. He finds the box in the cupboard beside the fridge. He sighs, “Because he wasn’t afraid to wake me up. I bit him, for Christ’s sake, and he still wouldn’t leave me like that.”

Will sets some water to boil on the stove. A sharp pain hits him in the gut, and he grinds his teeth together hard enough to hurt.

No, no, no, no. Two minutes; just two minutes until I can get Jack off the phone.

It’s a while before Jack says anything, much to Will’s great frustration. He crouches down and lays his forehead against the edge of the counter, clutching the phone in one hand and the dish towel by the sink in the other. The pressure twists in Will’s stomach and burns what it touches. Will can’t sort his thoughts out over the jumping surges of pain cutting through his entire midsection and ringing in his ears.

Jack finally says, “Well, I’m sorry about it…um, about judging you.”

Will imagines Jack nodding self-consciously to himself, clinging onto an air of nonchalance that he simply doesn’t feel but must always exude so as not to draw attention to himself when

something makes him uncomfortable. It's a neat little charade, the constant glaze of false apathy. Jack would be set for life if it was even a little bit real.

Will takes a quiet, steadying breath and says, "It's all right, Jack."

"I haven't talked to Dr. Lecter yet, but I plan to as soon as I can get some time apart from the Madchen case."

Jack would prefer to tell Hannibal in person, but he didn't feel the need to with Will. Distantly, Will connects that reality to a warning bell sounding dimly in the back of his mind. His brain, however, is still scattered between gut-wrenching agony and an unlikely apology from Jack Crawford, of all people, to Hannibal Lecter, of all people. He wishes desperately that he could point out the irony, as many problems as it would cause.

In a tight voice, Will says, "He'll appreciate it."

"Are you sure you're okay, Will?"

"Yeah, yes; fine." He changes his pace and sniffles audibly, not difficult to do since the abdominal pain gave him a bit of a runny nose. In his same strained voice, Will mumbles, "I'm just, you know, I'm surprised is all."

"Oh," Jack blurts out. "Right, well, we've been on the phone for a while, Will. I've got to get back. Beverly found, um, there were particulates at the…right."

It's pretty impressive how terrible a liar Jack is when he's flustered. He can dole out Shakespearean soliloquies under pressure and on a strict timetable, but embarrass the man a little bit with something sentimental and delicate, and all his charismatic speech craft goes sailing out the window.

Will sniffles again and says, "Thank you, Jack."

"Yeah."

They hang up, and Will drops the phone to grope at his stomach. He plops down into a sitting position and sighs. He would laugh if the constriction of his muscles wouldn't up the pain level that much more.

His ears twitch at the sound of a gentle burbling. He forces himself to stand and switch the fire off. His hands shake too much for him to trust himself with pouring it into the mug with the little teabag tucked inside, so he sets it in the sink and dumps the water as accurately as he can into the mug. The string with the paper falls in the mug, and half the water sloshes over into the sink and down the drain. He sighs, checks the clock on the stove, and sinks back to a sitting position on the floor.

Winston and Penelope come trotting into the room, quickly followed by Fenris, Harvey, and Madeline. The small white dog comes around and licks at Will's knee. He manages a small smile and scratches her on the top of her head.

“Hannibal was being nice to you this morning, wasn’t he?” As if to answer his question, she licks his wrist affectionately. Her maligned bite causes her bottom teeth to scrape gently across his arm. “If it was going to be anyone, I would’ve thought Fenris.”

The dog’s ears perk up at the sound of his name. He clambers closer and sniffs Will’s ear and his hair.

“No, no.” He laughs at the tickling sensation and clutches at the sparks shooting up his sides. He looks up at the counter where his tea is steeping in the sink. He mumbles, “Okay.”

He looks around, grabs the phone, and groans with the effort of reaching up and sliding it onto the counter. He struggles to his feet again and fishes the teabag out with a spoon before tipping some of the tea out and raising it carefully by the handle to his face. He blows the steam off and takes a tiny sip before setting it back down in the sink.

It isn’t a flavor he would choose, but it does help the nausea better than the peppermint did. This is his third cup since Hannibal left for work, and he hasn’t felt the need to sit hunched over the toilet once. The fruit salad had done him some good; so had his morning in with Hannibal.

He had been so late leaving the house; it was wonderful. Will smiles in spite of the biting pains in his midsection. Maybe it was just because they hadn’t had sex like that in almost two weeks that Hannibal had been so easy to persuade, but they really hadn’t had sex like *that* in a lot longer than two weeks. There was something desperate and fleeting and almost frightening about their hurried coupling.

The thought disconnects and fizzles out. He bites his lip through a muscle spasm that makes everything below his shoulders and above his sacrum hurt ten times worse. He plucks the aspirin bottle from the cupboard and pops two, hoping it’ll have a greater effect on the cramps this time.

He sets his hands on the counter and checks the clock on the stove again: half past four. Hannibal said he’d be home earlier than usual today, which could have meant six or eight or anywhere in between.

Dully, he eyes the dogs’ food bowls and changes out their water before trudging into the laundry room to check on the sheet he put in the dryer earlier. He’s careful to watch his IV hand when he removes it and wraps it up in his right arm. The phone is ringing again as he’s straightening out the sheet on his bed. He walks back into the kitchen, and Port Haven is calling. He’s come to expect Abigail when the number shows up, but he isn’t that surprised to hear Alana’s voice instead.

“Hi, Will. How are you?”

“I’m good.” He takes a sip of the tea; it’s cooled down to the point where he doesn’t have to blow on it. “Just keeping busy; but not.” He can practically hear her smiling over the phone.

“Doctor’s orders?”

He smiles, too, at her teasing tone. Trying to do away with the persistent ache in his belly by brightening his mood, he muses, “You’re the second person today to make that leap.”

“I wouldn’t call it a leap, really. Hannibal came in for a consult today, and he had dog hair on his suit. It was adorable.”

“Don’t let *him* you hear you say that.” He looks down at Madeline curled up with Simon. The bigger dog must have lumbered in while Will preoccupied himself with folding the sheet. He looks mournfully toward the hall, not wanting to finish the tiresome task he started. “And definitely don’t let him hear that I told you which dog it was.”

With interest, she asks, “Fenris? Or no, Penelope.”

He chuckles at the guesses that feature strictly larger dogs. “Madeline.” Alana actually laughs, probably picturing Hannibal and the tiny dog together. The sound steadies him; Alana’s good and safe and stable. It’s a shame she’ll never see him, not in any way that’ll truly matter. “He’s actually a big sensitive animal lover masquerading as an immaculate psychiatrist in ridiculously expensive suits.”

“I knew it,” she says, still smiling. He can tell.

He laughs and looks again at Madeline, now rolled over on her back and nestled in against Simon’s side. Rather than talk all day about his dogs, which he would gladly indulge in, he asks, “How did the consult go?”

She hums a vague affirmative and after a moment’s hesitation says, “We talked about you a little bit.”

Uncertainly, Will asks, “Is that what he was consulting for?”

“Oh, no, he was here for a different patient, not Abigail.” The clarification soothes him. She continues, “He said you were going to go back to your work with Jack once you come back from vacation.”

The use of the word vacation is interesting. He’d hardly call what he’s been going through a vacation.

“Did he?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Will, what happened with the LeBeau crime scene—”

“It was a misstep. It won’t happen again.”

“Why did it happen at all?”

“I was…” He repeats the words exactly as he said them to Jack at the scene. “I got lost in the reconstruction.”

“What does that mean?”

It means I had an encephalitic fever melting my brain that made me hallucinate more vividly than I normally do. I’m being treated now, so it won’t happen again.

A voice deep in his subconscious that maybe once belonged to the stag whispers, *At least not in a way that will interfere with anything.*

“I just see myself sometimes as being…actually there.” He takes a moment to organize his thoughts; they come more coherently now that the aspirin is beginning to take effect, thank God. “It feels real, and I get…” He chuckles without humor, at a loss for better words than those he’s used already. “I get lost in the reconstruction.”

He sips his tea and carries it to one of the chairs on a dish towel so the table won’t get wet when he sets it down. Alana clears her throat on the other end.

“Is that what you told Jack?”

Flatly, Will says, “Yes, and he’s concerned.”

“So is Hannibal, Will; so am I. I don’t think you should be out there anymore.”

“Jack said he’d cover me; he’s covering me.”

“Jack said you wouldn’t get too close, but then Hobbs happened and Buddish and Preston and now Georgia Madchen.”

And Abigail and Hannibal.

She says, “On top of all of this, he wants you on the Ripper, too. What happens if you get too close to him?”

“I won’t, Alana.”

“You won’t, what?”

“I won’t get lost in the Ripper’s reconstruction.”

“Will, just…it’s great that you’re taking off for a while, but maybe it would be best if you stayed off.”

“Best for whom, exactly? I save lives doing what I do.” There’s a lengthy pause that stretches out. Hannibal must have already told her that much. “I was just on the phone with Jack.” He takes a quick drink of his cooling tea and rubs at his abdomen where a dull throbbing pain still grates at his nerves. “He thinks I’m good to go.”

“Of course *he* does, Will. He wants you back at his side helping him catch serial killers. He’d turn a blind eye to put more of them away.”

He sighs heavily and moves the tea on the dish towel aside so he can lay his head down on the table. He sees Winston nudging at his thigh. He pats him on the head and nudges Harvey with his toe where he’s fallen asleep under his chair.

“I appreciate that you’re worried about me, but you don’t need to be.”

“We’re all worried about you, Will.”

“I know. I know you are.” He rubs at his eyes from the bottom out of habit. His glasses are in the bedroom. He hasn’t worn them since Hannibal started him on the immunoglobulin; that was right after he’d killed Sutcliffe. “I wish you wouldn’t be, but I have to go back.”

He really does have to go back, but not for the reasons he’s listed to Alana. The reasons are secrets kept between Will and Hannibal only.

“Hannibal said you wouldn’t listen to reason.”

“I listen,” he says, somewhat indignantly. “You’re right, okay? Hannibal’s right.” He pretends those aren’t two very, very contradicting statements. “But I’m right, too. What I do saves lives. I can’t give it up.”

“You can’t give up what you do, or you can’t give up saving lives?”

“As long as they stay the same thing, neither.”

Hesitantly, she asks, “And if they become separate things?”

When, he corrects in his head. *When* they become separate things.

“Then you can worry about me.”

“Will,” she starts. Something clatters on the other line.

“Alana?”

“There’s a fight in the courtyard. I thought it was…” He hears footsteps. Faintly, he hears her say, “Oh, Cora.”

“What’s going on?”

“I’ve got to go, Will. Can you just promise me that you’ll think about what we’ve been talking about? Please.”

“Um, yeah, I will.” He’s distracted by the sound of a buzzer on Alana’s end and more shuffling. “You should go take care of whatever’s happening.” The memory of the name hits him like a brick wall. “Wait, Armistead? Cora Armistead, Abigail’s friend?”

There's rustling like Alana might be fitting her arms into her coat. Something clatters noisily.

"She isn't involved, Will; not from what I can see. I have to go."

She hangs up and Will holds the phone in his hand, confused. He finishes his tea and keeps an eye on the phone in case someone else decides to call, but no one does. He washes his mug, noting with relief that his stomach is no longer a battlefield for competing muscle spasms. Reluctant to go back to his room and face the mess of sheets, he walks into the den with his IV stand and sits at the piano.

Before he's really made up his mind what to play, he takes down the Mozart sheet music and sets it on the floor. He rifles through his stack beside the bench for the book that tugs gently at his heartstrings and at the forefront of his subconscious.

His fingers graze over the deep maroon cover, well-worn and dog-eared and prized for many years by his teacher before it ever came to be in Will's hands. He runs his fingers across Schubert's name. He flips through it, still unsure of what he's looking for until he sees it toward the end of the book: Der Tod und das Mädchen, *Death and the Maiden*.

Will bends the spine so the book stays opened to the page and holds his hands over the keys, wavering. He racks his mind, but the explanation behind the internal pull still nagging at him doesn't present itself. It won't, not until he plays.

The first several measures are slow, pacing, and heavy. Will counts the beats as he goes, numbers giving way to mental representations of each note, and abstractions giving way to emotion.

He catches his fingers in a rest, blinking at the German. Beneath it, long ago, his teacher scribbled in the English translation, garbled probably because he only studied the language peripherally. Will waits too long through the rest but picks up again a few measures before the next passage. The notes speed up and come faster. He mouths the scratchy English as he goes, hands flying over the keys out of a strong but long-neglected muscle memory.

"Pass me by. Oh, pass me by. Go, fierce man of bones." He depresses the pedal when the music calls for it and backs off when the forte decrescendos into piano. "I am still young. Go, rather, and do not touch me. And do not touch me."

The music slows and crawls to another rest before picking up at Der Tod, at Death. Under his breath, he says, "Give me your hand, you beautiful and tender form."

The drawn out, morose lull shocks an image out of the recesses of his mind: sitting in the car with Hannibal, driving down the freeway on their way home from the airport.

It feels like we've started something permanent.

Shaking, Will continues, "I am a friend, and come not to punish. Be of good cheer. I am not fierce."

So you feel it, too.

“Softly shall you sleep in my arms.”

The notes continue for a few more measures and then taper off. The final chords echo through the house like a gunshot in the woods, like a scream in the night. He sets his hands in his lap and stares at the lines of music and at Professor Bellamy’s handwriting scarring the page in red, washed out ink. He stares at the lyrics and doesn’t move.

At the end of the Maiden’s passage, the page bleeds the words, *the student*; beside Death’s passage, that same red scrawl reads, *his instrument.*

Will leaves the book opened to the page and lets the dogs out the backdoor. He walks numbly into his bedroom to sleep. He’s tired a lot because of the immunoglobulin. Hannibal explained it when they first started treating with it; fatigue is a common side effect, and fatigue puts Will in a death-like sleep, usually without dreams. He flops down onto the mattress, right over the rumpled sheet, now cold, that he pulled from the dryer, and buries his face in the freshly laundered smell of clean linens and fabric softener.

He drifts for some time, unable to let go and sink under. Georgia Madchen, Georgia the Maiden, flickers behind his closed eyelids. She wields a knife dripping with her best friend’s blood, and she watches Hannibal snapping Sutcliffe’s jaw all the way back the way he told Will she did. She takes the knife from him when he gives it to her; she’s just an innocent, unthinking victim caught up in their game.

Will hears the back door click open and press gently shut. He scrunches his eyes tightly together and then opens them. He turns his face away from the sheets and finds that night has fallen outside and cast the room in shadow. He sinks back into the mattress and slowly registers that he must have been asleep at least for a time. A blanket lies draped across Will’s shoulders.

At some point during his nap, his limbs tangled into the sheet except the arm stretched safely out over the bed to prevent the IV from catching. A pillow has also materialized beneath his face to prop his head up and keep his neck from cricking. The pillow comes from the same side of the bed that Will collapsed onto, Hannibal’s side. It smells like him, strangely warm and crisp the way apple pie can smell if done right.

Hannibal is home.

He pushes to sit up and smells a tangy sweet aroma coming from the small crack in the door; Hannibal’s way of politely waking Will for dinner. He smiles to himself, though dread hangs ever present in his chest.

Give me your hand, you beautiful and tender form.

I am a friend, and come not to punish. Be of good cheer. I am not fierce.

Will shakes the hushed whispers out of his ears, unsure of whether he spoke it or thought it. He fights with the sheets to get out of bed after taking another swift inhale of the pillow case rife with the smell of Hannibal’s hair and Hannibal’s face. He’d rather stay and soak up that

scent, but his stomach is hungry for food and his hands are hungry to touch the man who would always be in bed with him if Will could have it his way.

He walks out into the hall and blinks groggily at what he can see of the warmly lit kitchen. Hannibal faces away from him pouring rice into a large glass bowl that doesn't belong to Will. He probably made a stop to his house before coming home.

"As I recall," Hannibal begins without turning around. "You were quite fond of this recipe when your instructor at Pierpoint gave the lesson."

Will spins Hannibal around and kisses him on the mouth, starving and deprived and aching for the intimacy they shared in this morning. Hannibal indulges him with a few swipes of his tongue and a squeeze at his backside that should not be as enticing as it is.

They stand wrapped up in each other, not breathing and touching and staring with heavy lids. Their kiss has jumpstarted Will's body, though he slept for too long to feel really energized after the fact.

When he can bear to tear his eyes off of Hannibal's face, he asks, "You made dirty rice?"

"It will complement the quail." Hannibal gestures at the four small birds cooling on the counter top to his left. Will nods and wraps his arms around Hannibal's waist, seeking a landing for the trouble harbored in his lungs and in his heart. Hannibal detects the intent behind the touch, of course. He would never miss it. His hands find Will's shoulders. "Did you sleep well, Will?"

It didn't feel like sleep; not even when he woke up did it feel like sleep. He presses his face into Hannibal's hair and says, "I had bad dreams."

Hannibal's thumb presses circles into his clavicle. His left hand wanders to the nape of Will's neck.

"Georgia Madchen."

"Yes," he answers, though Hannibal hadn't said it as a question. "I dreamt she watched you kill Sutcliffe, thinking it was me because she couldn't see your face."

"Do you fear what will happen to her when Jack Crawford finds her?" Will doesn't reply; he just tightens his hold around Hannibal's waist. "He will have her arrested for the crime, but she will tell him it was you."

"Is there any way she might remember you later, if they treated her for Cotard's Syndrome?"

"It's possible, yes."

"So you'll…and it'll look like I…"

"Yes, Will."

No replies surface on Will's tongue. He asked for honesty. As far as he can tell, Hannibal has complied with that request; well, threat, really, but Will still doesn't have anything planned for the occasion when Hannibal "slips" and lies to him anyway. He'd already come close just this morning.

"Jack says she'll probably come after me."

"Not an unlikely theory."

"What about this?" He lifts his hand connected to the IV. "If she comes here, they'll find out that I'm sick."

"They aren't investigating you, Will."

"Not yet."

Hannibal turns Will's jaw and looks him in the eye, something in him receding. He says, "They will not discover you until the time is right, Will."

Will searches his eyes and finds the stronghold that typically keeps even him out laid open. Hannibal does this to avoid an argument he'd rather not engage in; he does it to distract Will from the purpose behind his concerns and doubts. It never works, and it doesn't work now, but Will lets up tonight. He's hungry, and he missed Hannibal while he was out, and he doesn't have the endurance to work up a rage and sustain it.

"I'll set the table." Hannibal kisses him on the forehead and Will adds, "But not because your brainwashing scheme worked."

He sees Hannibal smiling out of the corner of his eye as he grabs two plates and some silverware. Hannibal likes that it doesn't affect Will; he likes that he needs to work harder than his average to disarm Will. He likes that they're the same in that respect.

Will sits at the table, tuckered out anew, with his head in his hands. Hannibal returns with some washed spinach to garnish the plates before setting two roast quails on each dish and making a second trip for the pilaf.

He pours a glass of wine for himself and a glass of ice water for Will. They eat in relative silence. Will gets halfway through his first bird when his conversation with Alana resurfaces in his head. He sets down the remaining chunk of breast meat that he broke off with his fingers and looks up to find Hannibal delicately carving the quail with a fork and knife. He battles with an urge to roll his eyes.

"Abigail's friend Cora got into a fight today; do you know anything about it?"

"Why would I?"

"Alana called earlier, and said you were over there at Port Haven."

"When did the altercation take place?"

“Around five, I guess. She said Abigail wasn’t involved, but…”

“But you worry because it was her friend.”

“Yeah.” Will drinks his water. His throat is dry from sleep and parched from drinking only hot tea all day. Hannibal eyes him, suspicious. Guilty, Will says, “This is my first glass.”

Frowning, Hannibal chastises him: “You need to remain hydrated, Will.”

“I drank a lot of the tea.”

“And has the nausea abated?”

Will nods and eats a forkful of the rice. It’s delicious; he didn’t expect anything less. He looks around at their surroundings: the soft lighting, the primal little dinner that’s got Hannibal picking at the meat with his fingers, too, the dirty rice Will grew up eating with his father in Biloxi and New Orleans. A smile quivers its way onto his face, and before he can speak, Hannibal catches him in the act.

“What?”

Will gestures with his fork at the room. He says, “This is pretty romantic, or it would be if I didn’t look like hell from sleeping all day.”

Hannibal smiles, and all right, fine. That pretty much always disarms Will, especially when it’s pointed at him. A flirtatious chord sneaking into his voice, he says, “If hell is a beautiful man with the sea in his eyes, yes, you do.”

Will gasps playfully, uplifted and cheerful at the turn the evening has taken. The darker clouds waiting to take them can be deterred a while longer. He drinks his water, shakes his head, and says, “You are; you’re being romantic.”

“I do love to chase you, Will.” Hannibal sips his wine and takes a bite of the pilaf.

To his plate Will murmurs, “You don’t have to chase me anymore, Hannibal.”

He bites at a length of torn breast meat, and Hannibal’s eyes find him and scour his face unyieldingly. Will doesn’t give him his eyes until he’s swallowed the mouthful of quail. Hannibal looks hungry in a way that has nothing to do with food or sex; he’s hungry for that thing they achieve sometimes that’s more than intimacy and more than companionship; that thing that might be fire or metamorphosis or a lucid dream timed to music.

He hungers for that synapse-deep connection with Will that they’ve accomplished twice now by way of violence. He hungers, and he does nothing to keep it hidden. The fact of his openness is not a ploy to control Will this time but a rare, unguarded moment of vulnerability.

Hannibal drops his eyes to Will’s throat and scans the flesh there for traces of a mark that have long since faded. Will can’t stand it when Hannibal suggests something he doesn’t plan to give the moment he offers it, and he can see Hannibal means to ask if they can try later; if they can sit down after their meal and attempt that connection Hannibal has only expressly

volunteered twice before—once in his kitchen after he confessed what happened to his sister and once here in Will's house after the truth came out about his encephalitis, about Abigail.

Will has come to enjoy taking what he craves when the craving hits him, and the craving has hit him now. He doesn't let Hannibal say it out loud and risk tempting him too far.

"You know I always want to," Will whispers, answering Hannibal's question before he can ask.

Hannibal finds his eyes once more for a few seconds and then returns to his plate. A smile has found its way to his face. The sight of it warms Will and kindles the beginnings of his craving. He calmly takes a bite of the quail, chews, and swallows before speaking again. He says, "Finish your dinner, Will."

If Will is hell, maybe that makes Hannibal the devil or some variant of the Greeks' Hades. The name is both a place and an entity; both the underworld and its god; hell and the devil.

If the devil is a gorgeous man in a suit with dog hair on it, yes, he is.

Hannibal chuckles softly over the lip of his wine glass, and Will blinks.

"Trouble keeping your thoughts to yourself, Will?"

He feels his face glowing, and he feels Hannibal leaning across the corner of the table to mouth at the blood warming under the skin at his neck. Will leans into the touch and releases the foggy sense of worry still clinging to him.

Will mumbles, "The underworld and its god."

"Hell and the devil," Hannibal replies easily, delightedly.

Will finds, and is unalarmed to find, that the answer delights him, too. Ages ago when his father told him of the wendigo and Will said he would kill it, he didn't anticipate what kind of monster Hannibal would be: a monster just like him, a man set apart from the world, a lonely creature malnourished for its need of companionship.

They've found each other, and even as this world promises to spin out of control as the clock runs down, they cannot be made to let go. Will reaches for Hannibal's right hand with his left as he's taking another pull of his wine.

He holds on, and he doesn't let go. Hannibal's face is a blank slate, but his eyes are warm; message received.

Will finishes the balsamic basted quail and tends to the last of the dirty rice. He drinks the rest of his water, and more distinctly than he can feel the fluid pushing into his vein from the needle, he feels that persistent longing ebb out of Hannibal again.

He feels it and luxuriates in the soft heat of it, calmed by their joined hands and reconciled to waiting. Hannibal will give what he promised. He can't bear not to anymore. He's been branded by Will on the inside, forged in fire, and transformed; he's experienced

metamorphosis. Will has, too. They've been becoming each other, ever since that day in Hannibal's office when he put stitches in Will's hand.

They've been changing, but there's more yet they still must do; the first task on a very long list of them is finishing dinner. Will sets his fork down.

Hannibal stands and takes the dishes to the sink to wash them. He insists Will sit down when he offers to help, so he walks back out to the den instead of remaining in the kitchen. He sits at the bench before the piano and situates his stand more sturdily before facing the music. He runs his fingers down the page, feeling the ridges where Professor Bellamy's pen marks bit too harshly into the paper.

"The student and his instrument," Will repeats to himself. He touches the last translated line of Death's passage: *Softly shall you sleep in my arms.*

Hannibal walks into the room, light on his feet and purposeful in his steps. He comes to stand behind Will and kisses him on the top of his head before bending at the waist to nuzzle at Will's neck and jaw, breathing in the scent on his skin as he moves about.

"Will you play for me?" He peppers Will's hair line and temple with soft kisses.

Will hums and his hands drop to the keys. He plays Death and the Maiden without thinking, without opening his eyes. Hannibal sits beside him on the bench, legs facing the opposite way and both arms fitted snugly about Will's waist as he sways slightly with the mournful tempo at the start of the song.

Hannibal whispers the original lyrics against his neck, and Will leans into him; his body seeks the warm puffs of his breath and the gentle brush of his lips against his skin.

Fed directly with Hannibal's voice reading out the German, Will whispers the words with him, reciting from memory and learning the pronunciation with every word that falls from Hannibal's lips. Together in one voice void of pitch or tone, in a voice they shared once in Will's dream after he crashed his car, they say, "Bin Freund, und komme nicht, zu strafen."

Hannibal stirs slightly at his side and pulls back to look at Will. He keeps his eyes closed; the connection holds better this way. Hannibal respects his decision not to return his stare and lays his head on Will's shoulder.

"Sei gutes Muts! Ich bin nicht wild. Sollst sanft in meinen Armen schlafen."

Will's eyes fall open and he finishes the sinking melody. Hannibal presses his fingers against Will's ribs, capturing his attention at last. He says, "Now, Will?"

"Now, Hannibal."

They kiss slowly and passionately, and there lingers still an ominous mist of things to come. It endows this night with a temporality and an unmatched, precious urgency. Will holds on, and Hannibal holds him with a need and a plea that far surpasses Will's; far outmatches it in so many heartbreaking, enthralling ways that Will loses his breath to Hannibal's lips.

It's starting. It's begun.

Chapter End Notes

Used in a scenario similar to the one used here, Will and Crawford in *Red Dragon*: "You kill me, you really do." "I don't follow you." "Yes, you do."

Der Tod und das Mädchen by Franz Schubert (first featured in Chapter 11 of HH, if you were curious) and *not* translated by me
http://lostupabove.wordpress.com/2012/03/18/der-tod-und-das-madchen-with-translation/

Roast Quail w/ Balsamic Reduction
http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/roast_quail_with_balsamic_reduction/

Dirty Rice
http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/dirty_rice/

Pierpoint Restaurant is a real place that I don't own and am not affiliated with (but I wish I was because crab cakes omg).

Ghost Song

Chapter Summary

> Just what the doctor ordered.

Chapter Notes

> *We have assembled inside this ancient and insane theater/To propagate our lust for life and flee the swarming wisdom of the streets*
>
> "Do you desire to be wholly one; always day and night to be in one another's company? For if this is what you desire, I am ready to melt you into one and let you grow together, so that being two you shall become one, and while you live a common life as if you were a single man, and after your death in the world below still be one departed soul instead of two—I ask whether this is what you lovingly desire, and whether you are satisfied to attain this?"—there is not a man of them who when he heard the proposal would deny or would acknowledge that *this meeting and melting into one another, thus becoming one instead of two, was the very expression of his ancient need*. And the reason is that human nature was originally one and we were a whole, and the desire and pursuit of the whole is called love. – Plato's *Symposium*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Lay flat, Will."

"What are you going to do?"

"What you want me to do," Hannibal murmurs, easing Will down onto the couch in the den. He stands at the sound of one of the dogs scratching at the backdoor and goes to let them out. Before Will can move from the couch and resituate his IV stand beside the couch, Hannibal returns with a pillow from Will's room. He sets it on Will's stomach and moves the stand for him, anticipating his concerns for the logistics of their current seating arrangement.

Will clears his throat and says, "When it worked in the past it wasn't something either of us wanted to happen."

"And as such, you weren't to decide how to use it or when to come out of it." Hannibal lifts his head gently and positions the pillow beneath it before lowering him back down. He

continues, “If your environment and your physiological responses to it are controlled, the experience can be controlled.”

“Except not fully.”

“In theory, yes; in practice, no, not typically.” Hannibal brushes his hair out of his eyes and stops when Will reaches up to muss it anew. He smirks from his chair seated across from the middle couch cushion and teases, “You would be perfectly happy if I put no effort into my appearance, wouldn’t you?”

“Mm, perfectly happy,” Will mumbles. He closes his eyes and turns his head to the side facing the edge of the couch. “There’s a thought.” He opens his eyes, unprepared for the curious, almost mystified expression on Hannibal’s face. He can’t come up with a way to address it in a way that Hannibal won’t craftily deflect, so he doesn’t bother making a floundering attempt to. Instead, he asks, “How do you plan to control it?”

“I don’t,” Hannibal muses, taking to brushing his fingers across Will’s forehead and down his cheek.

“Well, then how is this…” Will replays an old memory of Hannibal’s voice in his dream. “You want to guide it.” He laughs at the mischievous light in Hannibal’s eyes. Hope burbling in his skin and in his heart, he asks, “Great Falls Park?”

“The place brings you a great deal of peace.”

It didn’t used to; it never did before Hannibal walked him through the park’s metaphysical double so long ago. Hannibal’s presence in the place sands down the friction of reality that frequently tapers into that constructed realm of waterfalls and sky. Hannibal and the stag together with Will built that place and sealed it tightly from unwanted visitors together; they had resided there in Will’s mind, really, as one entity that only Will could access.

Purposely aiming for vague, Will says, “It’s nice to have somewhere to go, away from everyone else.”

“I imagine it would be, for you more than for most people.” Hannibal’s hand flattens against Will’s jaw, thumb roving along his unshaven cheek. “Close your eyes, Will.”

Will does but reconsiders. Before Hannibal can begin, he suggests, “What if we went somewhere else for this? Just because I…it’s my somewhere.”

A soft expression crosses Hannibal’s face, touching his eyes for a moment before it vanishes into the confines of that mind Will has been inside of twice now but still can’t grasp completely. “Where shall I take you then, Will; the office, or here, perhaps?”

Hesitant to even mention it, Will says, “What about your, well, you called it a castle, I think?”

“You’ve never been there.”

With Will's unrivaled imagination, it shouldn't be a concern; in fact, Will is positive that's not the issue. He presses regardless. Hannibal would press him if the tables were turned.

"No, but you showed me your drawings, and I've seen pictures online of—"

"That orphanage was not my home," Hannibal snaps, turning to look toward the front door as if he means to run. He crosses his legs at the knee, chest rising once with an abrupt intake of air. Will touches the overlapping knee cautiously and sets his hand there when Hannibal makes no effort to shy away from him.

"You climbed the trees," Will whispers, forcing Hannibal's attention to his hushed words so he won't miss them. He claims Hannibal's relaxed shoulders as a victory. "You said you made it your mission to climb them all." He smiles warmly when Hannibal finally brings his eyes back, and with his voice at the same faint volume, he asks, "How far did you get?"

Hannibal drops his eyes, swallows, and lays his hand over Will's on his knee. How many had asked Hannibal about the trees in his childhood home in Lithuania; how many had questioned the little boy he used to be; how many had ever earned even this uncomfortable display of reluctance from Hannibal to divulge a simple but painful truth?

Quietly, in the same manner as Will, Hannibal confesses, "I climbed six."

"How many trees were there?"

"Hundreds."

"You were young," Will murmurs. He rests his head back on the couch and doesn't fret when Hannibal gently removes Will's hand from his knee and places it on his stomach. "Six years old?"

A beat skips between them, and Hannibal murmurs, "Eight."

"Take me through that summer." Will closes his eyes to give Hannibal that privacy and eases his shoulders against the cushions. He counts his breaths during Hannibal's silence; seven inhales and six exhales. When Hannibal remains silent for much longer, Will amends, "Or we can try somewhere else if you're not ready to go there again."

His phantom voice replies, "I've gone willingly to worse places."

"That doesn't make the better places easier to go to," Will says gently, letting his eyes drift open to find Hannibal staring out toward the door again. "You beat all your demons, but you can't face your angels."

"I had only one."

"Let's go find her then," Will whispers; his voice has become so soft that his words fall nearly soundlessly from his lips except for the rougher consonants. Hannibal clenches his jaw and turns just to the left toward Will without directly facing him. He shakes his head.

Despondently, Hannibal says, "She isn't waiting for me anymore, Will."

“Yes, she is.” Will sits up with his hands planted behind him on the cushions. The force behind his statement surprises him, but it surprises Hannibal, too. He seizes that moment of shocked compliance and continues, “I’ll find her, Hannibal; if you let me, I will.”

Will watches Hannibal to see if he’ll challenge him, but he merely studies the wood paneling of the floor. He holds his hand out to him, and Hannibal takes it.

“Here,” Will says, moving the pillow with his other hand. Hannibal’s arm shoots between the pillow and its path as Will swings it over his lap. He watches Hannibal take it and carefully maneuver it up and over the line of the IV. Will pats the freed spot behind him, ignoring Hannibal’s disapproving headshake. Resigned, he stands, turns, and sits. Will tuts, “No, like this…”

He manhandles Hannibal’s legs so his upper body turns to lean sideways against the back of the couch and moves his right leg up onto the cushions behind Will. Once Hannibal is in position, Will nestles in against him so he can feel his heart beating through his shirt and suit jacket. The clothes create almost too thick a barrier between them, so he separates each half before sliding the tie over Hannibal’s shoulder, unbuttoning his vest, and nuzzling that strong heartbeat again. Hannibal’s chest rumbles slightly with a low laugh that inspires a grateful relief inside of Will and makes him sleepy.

“Take me through that summer,” Will repeats into the smooth, warmed material of Hannibal’s shirt. He sighs beneath Will, quietly.

“There was an abundance of sun that year.” Hannibal slips his fingers into Will’s hair and his heart skips beneath Will’s cheek; a curious oddity to Will whenever he encounters it in Hannibal. He’d killed men calmly without breaking a sweat or batting an eyelash; he’d also had an episode and been sick the last time he talked to Will about his sister. Hannibal speaks again, disrupting Will’s thoughts. He says, with difficulty, “Mischa and I played by the water often. She enjoyed the mud, more than most of her toys and sometimes more than socially acceptable food.”

Will muffles his laugh against the shirt pressed up to his lips. Hannibal brings his other hand down between Will’s shoulder blades to press at his spinal cord in that incredible way that he does. Will peeks up to see Hannibal staring at the ceiling, farther away than Will can follow until they’ve done what they set out to do.

“What else?” Will rests his head back onto Hannibal’s chest, turning his face into his body to breathe in and around that warm, pleasant scent. “Tell me everything.”

“Our mother clothed her in white and yellow dresses; they almost always tore or dirtied. Mischa walked that year and discovered the act of the embrace. Her favorite place about home was the stream. Our father took her out on the paddleboat for her birthday in March, and she had since been quite inseparable from the water and by extension, the mud, the insects, and the fish.”

Will closes his eyes and pictures Lecter Castle in his mind’s eye, envisions the hundreds of trees, and imagines the abundant sunlight, as Hannibal called it. He lets the two-dimensional memory of the Soviet-run orphanage as he saw it online loom up overhead and cast shade

over his eyes as it blocks the summer sun. Will sees birds in the trees but can't hear them; he can't hear anything.

He extends the fingers of one hand at his side and narrows the scope of his vision and concentration to that hand. His fingers slowly curl inward and a weight slips through the spaces in between; soft skin slightly dusty but clammy, pudgy the way children's hands are.

"What did she look like?" Will mumbles to the sky, unwilling to speak any louder than he must for Hannibal to hear him through the barriers of grass and light and open air.

"She was small for her age," Hannibal answers, voice filtering down from the leaves in the trees. "Her hair shone white in the moonlight and yellow in the sun. Her eyes searched for questions in everything, wide and the color of tree bark as she took what she could see of the world into her pretty mind."

Will looks down at the tiny hand gripping his and sees the solemn golden-haired cherub staring up at him. Her deep brown eyes blaze a diluted pale orange in the sunlight, the color of a spark igniting on a match head. He squeezes the little girl's hand; her face lights up, mouth quirking at the edges in a gleeful smile he pieces together, subconsciously, from odds and ends he's seen of Hannibal's smile.

"Mischa," he says, naming her and breathing life into her static, miniature form.

"Hannibal," she calls him. The pronunciation needs work; one other thing his subconscious throws into the mix. He lets her tug on his hand and follows after her, though she is nowhere near strong enough to actually pull him. She says Hannibal's name again: "Hannah-bill."

"How did she refer to you?" Will's arm twitches; vaguely, he's aware of it wrapping tighter around Hannibal's side.

"She called me brother."

"Could she say your name?"

He follows Mischa down a trail toward a bank by a babbling stream. She trudges somewhat awkwardly because of the early stage in her development. A few times she starts to run but hobbles in her course; Will has to steady her so she won't fall. It's easy to do. She weighs close to nothing, small as she is.

"Not correctly."

"How did she say it?"

Hannibal's sigh is a whisper of wind. Voice coalescing with Mischa's, he says, "Ha-knee-ball."

Will crouches down with Mischa by the water, holding his hands out to receive the mud she balls up neatly in her immediately filthy hands. Leaden with the soothing trickle of water and the faintly rustling leaves in the trees, Will says, "Keep going, Hannibal."

Even through the haze of his dream, Will feels Hannibal's hesitation. It ripples through the net of his consciousness overhead and disrupts the cool breeze. Will can only just hear Hannibal through the atmospheric pressure of his imagined alternate universe with Mischa and the Lithuanian countryside. He strains, but he hears Hannibal ask, "Is she there, Will?"

"Yes," Will affirms for him. He nods his head at the girl in the pale yellow dress caked in drying mud with two translucent circles at her knees from plopping down onto the wet earth. "She thinks I'm you."

The nerves in his back flood with warmth at the stimulation of Hannibal's fingers. He feels the pressure and the heat of Hannibal's hands slipping under his shirt and into his hair. He smiles, attempting and failing to keep the smiling girl from eating the mud straight off her fingers as if it were candy.

Leaning into the heat Hannibal's touch summons out of him, Will says, "Tell me more about the summer, Ha-knee-ball." His side smarts for a flashing second under Hannibal's fingers, a pinch. Before Hannibal can do as Will requested of him, Will teases, "You said you weren't a sensitive psychopath."

"I never expressly said I was either of those things."

Will smirks, rolls his eyes, and tests the viscosity of the mud between his fingers. The grit of the dirt paired with the sheen of the water from the stream coats his fingers and dries quickly the way blood does. For a split second in time Mischa's face flickers out of focus, and the small amounts of mud on her chin and arms flash violently red. From her bloody lips, she asks, "What's a matter, brother?"

Her face and the color of the mud return to normal, and Will pleads, "Hannibal, talk to me."

Hannibal speaks into and through Will; their chests buzz together and words hum out Will's throat. Mischa looks to him at the sound of the words, and it's only because Will imagines that she would react this way, but she jumps up and throws her tiny arms about Will's neck. She kisses his cheek and bunches his shirt in her dirty fingers.

When she pulls back, the blue eyes staring back at him are Abigail's and the long dark hair brushing his shoulders is hers, too. A piece of the puzzle slots together at last.

"Oh," Will breathes.

Her eyes search his as if she doesn't follow his pattern of thought. Cheerfully, she repeats, "Oh?"

"You're…Hannibal…"

She laughs, "You are Hannibal. What are you talking about, papa?"

"Pa—What?"

"Will's back with fish," she shouts, getting to her feet. Her fingers leave dirty stains on the skirt of her dress where she pinches it in her fingers. He watches dumbly as she runs toward

the slippery bank where the edge of the water laps at the muddy earth. He stands after a delayed moment and watches the boat drifting slowly toward them as Abigail sloshes out to guide the boat onto moderately dry land. Hannibal steps out of the boat and guides the wooden vessel with Abigail so his knees soak in the stream's water.

He watches Abigail take the dead fish from Hannibal and receive a kiss in her hair. He stands still as Abigail runs passed him with the fish toward the castle. Her dress flutters as she goes, and Hannibal's hand slips onto his back.

Turning slowly and still processing, Will says, "She called you Will."

"Why wouldn't she?"

Hannibal smiles and presses a kiss to Will's lips that feels strangely familiar but entirely different; it's his own kiss felt from the reverse side. Hannibal's eyes shine in the sun, moss green at the edges and his sister's firewood brown clutching at the innermost rings around his irises. Will stares at Hannibal's sun-embossed hair and at his smiling mouth that resembles the shape of Will's but retains the physical properties of his own.

Will whispers, "What is going on?"

Far above the embellished afternoon silence, Will hears Hannibal ask, *"What do you see?"*

"I…" He follows after Hannibal along the trail and up the stairs that lead into the massive castle. "I'm you, and you're me. Abigail's here, too."

"Mischa," Hannibal remarks.

Will climbs up the steps with that practiced grace that pushes through him when he channels Hannibal successfully and says, "Yes."

The high ceilings of the stone interior harness every sound and movement. He peers into the kitchen to find Abigail sitting on the counter kicking her feet aimlessly while someone in a white outfit prepares the fish over the stove. Hannibal keeps walking before him, so Will follows. The hallway darkens the further away from the kitchen they go, and the rooms without doors call to him as he passes them up. He sees flashes of colorless light in the backs of his eyes as a scene fills each room for the briefest of seconds.

He sees Cassie Boyle impaled in a field, pale skin glowing like an ember long after the light fades; he sees Sutcliffe like arranged simply in his chair, jaw bent back like a grotesque flower opened to the sun; he sees Franklin Froidevaux and Tobias Budge; Yusuf Vartanian and Gilbert Parish. He sees a room splashed in blood and filling the faceless bodies of the men Hannibal killed for his sister. They stop at the end of the hall, and Will blinks the death and the gore from his eyes to step into the final room, barricaded by a heavy metal door unlike that of the entrance to the castle.

Before stepping through the threshold, Will looks back the way he came, back down the corridor lathered in blood and abandoned screams. The rooms still flicker with white light around each doorframe. Will swallows and turns away from it; if it ever held the promise of a

way out, that path doesn't lead to escape for him anymore. He passes through the doorway and stands in an immaculately clean and orderly room built exactly like Hannibal's office.

The singed walls match the sooty gray-black of the furniture. The empty books on the shelves repeat forever, and the only point of reference in the room apart from the mezzanine is the towering beast of blackened feathers and glowering red eyes, the stag. It stands breathing and shuffling in the middle of the room, statuesque and gruesome and roaring, agitated, as the furnishings about the room disintegrate into piles and piles of ash and bone.

"Whose room is this?" Will paces around Hannibal toward the gargantuan animal scuffing its cloven hooves at the tarnished wood paneling of the floor.

"It's yours, of course."

Will turns and sees Hannibal standing with his hands in his pockets. His attention diverts to the hulking creature huffing just over Hannibal's shoulder; an animal to parallel Will's. Its sterling white pelt emanates its own light in the dreary room; its piercingly red antlers of glass glint and reflect that luminescence. The ripped open belly of the massive animal oozes blood. Will backs away only to feel a perfectly familiar nudging sensation in the center of his back.

The coarse tines of the stag's antlers catch on his shoulder and in his hair. He finds himself stumbling forward quite against his better judgment. Hannibal mirrors him, and the stag at his heels walks around to his side and keeps pace with him until Will is pressed up against him and their stags circling each other.

A fragile voice calls out from the cracked open door, "Brother?"

They each turn to look. Abigail stands just outside the room with the little blonde girl's hand held firmly in her own. Her face is a mask; Mischa's eyes stare curiously at the stags, but she says nothing else.

"Stay there," Will says at the same time that Hannibal beckons her to join them in the room. "Hannibal, it's not safe."

"*Hannibal?* Why are you calling me Hannibal?"

A ring of lashing flames swallows up the room and reveals the blue, racing sky overhead. The stars burn through the darkening canvas, and they are once more engulfed in darkness, fire, and the rubble of a decimated home, inheritance, and namesake. The brittle bones that once composed the furnishings of the room break down and evaporate into murky, black tendrils of sulfurous smoke.

Fearful of their safety, Will shouts, "Abigail, take Mischa outside, please."

He can't make out her figure through the ash falling in the room, but Abigail replies, "We want to see."

He goes to argue, but his words dry up on his tongue. Something else stirs deep in the back of his mind and in his gut. Something else is happening.

The white stag stands at Will's shoulder and the black at Hannibal's. They toss their heads back and bugle; the long, mournful pairing of sounds synthesizes into a single undertone and escalates in pitch until their unified call transforms into a delicate harmonic disrupting the dust and misery of this funerary room. Will bumps his forehead into Hannibal's, unable to help himself. He sees the stags slotting their antlers together out of the corner of his eye.

In Will's voice, Hannibal says, "You promised you'd show me everything. Do it."

Mind functioning out of memory and out of a displaced instinct, Will murmurs, "You will not run from me." He sets his hand on Hannibal's stomach, an idea blooming but not yet taking effect. Hannibal shudders beneath his fingers, an identical truth dawning on him. Will adds, "You will not keep yourself from me."

"Will?"

"Yours, I'm yours." Hannibal clutches at the back of Will's neck. The stags fall in a collected, wrestling heap to the ground. The white stag bellows, victorious.

Will mumbles as he bares his throat to a questing, eager mouth, "Hannibal."

Those teeth pierce his flesh, and a vortical exchange occurs. He feels himself transported to that night in Williamsport tearing into Hannibal's fine skin, the ache in his jaws at wanting to bite down even harder. He recognizes that tremor in Hannibal, that action distilled from its drive the way Will's mind fought that night to be separate from Hannibal's. He fastens his fingers around Hannibal's throat and forces the violence out of him. He exists in that instant as both unruly, accelerated fires merging into one; *they* exist as a monolith of marble and as the David within.

"You're ready," Will says around a blissful laugh. "You're ready for me at last."

They drop to the floor in succession, still struggling against each other. The stags meld and becoming one solitary being; that monstrous speckled beast melds and consumes Hannibal, crazed and bloodied and bruised. The elephantine stag with its fierce eyes of maroon noses at Will's cheek and vibrates and surges with the electricity previously confined to its three componential bodies. Their faces merge, and their bodies open and amalgamate; the raw foundations of nervous sinew burn away the boundaries between and the pulsating organs mesh together.

They are destruction and creation; they are the beginning and the end. They are the continuance of life and the promise of death. They are whole and perfect, and they have won.

Metamorphosis complete, the remaining walls burn away and the embers glowing angrily in the ash heaps have no breeze to sail away on. He steps over the shattered pieces of red glass and the dismantled tines littering the dusty floor. He walks toward the door where Abigail stands still in the doorway with Mischa perched on her hip. He brushes his fingers soothingly through her golden hair and brings Abigail in for a tight hug.

Into his shoulder, she asks, “You won’t get in trouble for being here then?”

“Decidedly not,” he murmurs with a calm, sated smile. He pulls back and brushes his thumb across the little girl’s forehead and finds himself holding her. Her eyes flicker blue once, and the empty smoking room under the clear night sky crackles as the last of its structures give way and collapse. Into her eyes that still reflect a world of sunlight and grassy meadows, Will says from the very core of himself, “We’ll take care of you; we will always take care of you.”

He opens his eyes, and the charred interior of the castle has given way to the den in Will’s house in Wolf Trap, Virginia. The occasional creak and groan of the house settling only serves to augment the occasional onslaught of perfect, rushing silence. Hannibal shakes his shoulders, gently but persistently.

“Will, are you awake? You were shivering.”

Will hides his smile in Hannibal’s neck and breathes leisurely, happily. “I’m here.”

“Are you?”

He lets Hannibal lift his chin up and patiently waits for Hannibal to discover himself in Will’s complacent stare. It only takes about a second, if that. He smiles at the flattered sense of pride that bursts faintly in his chest. Hannibal could map and navigate his eyes as easily as he could the stars. Will could do it, too; he does it frequently, to measure the honesty of Hannibal’s emotional displays.

Hannibal smiles and brings Will up for a kiss and then another. He prefers kissing Hannibal this way as opposed to the way they had in his dream when Hannibal mimicked Will instead of acting as himself. Will grins at the palatable differences and how strongly he perceives them.

“You began to mumble at the end. What happened?”

“The stags were there, yours and mine; they became each other, and then we became them. We were one, all levels of our conscious minds.”

“And Abigail was Mischa.”

“Yes,” Will sighs. He nuzzles his face back into Hannibal’s neck, overcome with grief. Hannibal experiences that same hollow sense of mourning. There’s no reason he wouldn’t; it’s his. “Will you draw me a picture of her, of Mischa?”

Her name is a fragment of a sonnet, a kaleidoscopic shard cut out of a stained glass window. The little girl he saw he created; he could scarcely reconstruct her face in his mind. Only her eyes he could see burning back into his because in the sun, Hannibal’s eyes clung onto a variation of that warm hazel he’d seen in the girl’s stare.

“Yes, Will.”

“I saw all the people you killed rotting in the bedrooms. Mischa wasn’t among them.”

“Why should she be?”

“No, I’m telling you.” Will pushes himself up. His heavy arms and dizzying head slow him down, but he eventually manages to fold his legs underneath himself and sits straighter so his eyes are level with Hannibal’s. He straightens out, too, and leaves his leg tucked up around Will’s body. “It’s not our fault, what happened to her.”

“Of course it’s not your fault, Will.”

“Do you understand what I’m telling you,” Will whispers. He bites his lip through his smile that stretches quickly into a grin that he can see reflected in Hannibal’s eyes. He leans forward and presses his forehead to Hannibal’s the way he did in his dream. He bunches the sleeves of Hannibal’s shirt in his balled up fists. “Do you see it?”

Hannibal’s arms close around Will’s waist in a silken vise. He says, “Tell me what it is.”

“I’m *with* you. I’m here, and I’m with you.” A slew of images flit across Will’s vision, tinted by that influence that has always thirsted to be paired with him; altered throughout by the objective, analytical scope through which Hannibal sees everything, including Will and including himself. “Don’t you feel it?”

“I feel that you are changed,” Hannibal murmurs against Will’s lips. He slides his hands up Will’s back and down his sides. “I feel that you have been enlightened.”

“I want you to be here, too. I know—I *feel* how badly you want to be here, too.” Hannibal’s fingers clench into Will’s shirt and twist. He doesn’t confirm or deny Will’s claim. There would be no use in doing either. “Just speak to me. Say anything you want.”

Hannibal takes a stuttering breath, bowing his head slightly forward so the bridge of his nose brushes along Will’s. He puts a hand in Will’s hair and hides his face in the curve of Will’s neck.

Will coos to him, “You aren’t alone anymore.”

A dam breaks inside of Will, and he feels it counterpart breaking inside of Hannibal as the man comes apart inch by inch in his arms. Hannibal trembles finely in his embrace, a black-feathered stag pinned down by its complement. Their barriers have fallen from time to time, and their strongholds have slipped open, but the totality of this moment, of their mutual exposition, is unrivaled and unparalleled. It is pure; it is truth and harmony.

“I love you,” Will whispers, ruffling Hannibal’s hair in his fingers. “Love you, I love you.”

It takes him a moment to register Hannibal’s lips moving minutely against his shirt. He tugs Hannibal up by the curve of his jaw and hears him mumbling, “Aš tave myliu, mano gėlyte.”

Will kisses those fluttering lips and watches Hannibal’s eyes slip open as if he’s only just noticed where he is. They stare, breathlessly and unblinkingly until Will breaks their silence with another soft, steady kiss. He murmurs, “Talk to me, baby.”

“I never want to be without you,” Hannibal whispers. He pushes Will down gently onto his back and eases his legs to one side of Will’s so as little of his weight crushes him as his physically possible given the dimensions of the couch. He holds Will tightly and presses his nose into Will’s hair. “I want to destroy everyone who ever tries to separate us.”

The words are a salve and a free fall. Will feels them whirring and buzzing in his chest. He feels them verified and reciprocated in his own mind even through the pleasant haze of Hannibal’s presence there alongside his consciousness.

“I adore you at a capacity that I haven’t possessed since I was a child and with fervor I demonstrated last as a much younger man. I want to live inside of your bones and to breathe beneath your skin.”

Will finds Hannibal’s stomach with his hand where he touched him in his dream. Hannibal’s hand slips down to cover it in his own. Will repeats to himself, “Inside my bones and beneath my skin.”

“I want to be there, always; a scar to remind you that this is real and that it always will be.”

“Inside my bones and…” Will draws his hand from Hannibal’s and feels through the shirt for his warm stomach beneath the material. “Always there beneath my skin.” Will huffs a laugh and brings his eyes to the mildly confused, but entertained expression on Hannibal’s face. “A *scar* to prove that this is *real*, Hannibal; to prove that it will always have been real.”

“What are you thinking of, Will?”

“You dreamt that I ripped out your heart; you dreamt that you were Wound Man.”

“Yes, and?”

“And? And why would I do that to you? Why would I make you look like the victim when you weren’t a victim at all?”

Hannibal’s brow furrows, and he studies Will’s eyes and his heart racing in his chest. It beats so loud Will doesn’t doubt Hannibal can hear it or even smell his blood pumping faster throughout his body. Something hits him; Will sees the way it changes his eyes.

Will adds when Hannibal doesn’t voice the answer, “Why would Garrett Jacob Hobbs try to murder his own daughter when he couldn’t bring himself to do it for months?”

“It was all over for him,” Hannibal replies evenly.

“No, well—okay, yes. He’s a bad example.” Will waves his hand in dismissal. “Abigail is a better example on her own.”

“A victim seen as blameless,” Hannibal murmurs. His eyes track along Will’s collar bone and further down to his stomach, recapturing the flicker of an idea so raw and unrefined it slips away too easily. His hand covers Will’s on his stomach, and he returns his eyes to Will’s. “A victim unseen and overlooked.”

“You need me caged to suggest my innocence and broken to prove it.”

“I would have thrilled once in your destruction, but I…” Hannibal’s jaw clenches. Will watches his eyes fix stubbornly to a spot on Will’s cheek. He cards his hand through Will’s hair, and Will doesn’t finish the thought for him, though he can fill in the blank space with a number of statements. The one Hannibal chooses to say was closer to the bottom of Will’s list, as he didn’t expect to hear Hannibal confess it in so many words. He says, “I would never find another like you.”

Will angles his head to take Hannibal’s cheek and his lips and his jaw in a series of light, open mouthed kisses. Hannibal rests his forehead just above Will’s ear and relaxes his body. Will whispers to him, “There will come a time for us to be free.” His eyes droop and the edges of his mind pulse with an oncoming headache. “When that day comes, we can burn the world if we want to.”

“We’ll need to burn a few others before we get there.” Hannibal’s breath puffs warmly over the shell of Will’s ear. “Jack Crawford will not give up on proving Abigail’s guilt.”

“We’ll have to go see her,” Will murmurs, choosing not to address yet what they will inevitably have to do to save her from her past. “When can we start reducing doses?”

“Perhaps next week, Will.”

“Is there some reason you want me bedridden until then? I already feel okay. Why couldn’t we start tomorrow?”

“The encephalitis hasn’t cleared up enough to allow you the time we will need to put our plans into effect.”

“I thought crazy was good. You want me crazy when Jack finds me.”

“But I want to be able to reach you as well.” Hannibal sits up and helps Will to sit up, too. He says, “I will bring you some tea and valerian root to help you sleep.”

Will stands groggily, noting how much darker the night has fallen outside. He walks his stand toward the hall and asks over his shoulder, “How long were we lying there for?” The backdoor squeaks open, and the dogs come padding into the den from the kitchen. Winston sniffs him and happily wags his tail.

“About two hours.”

He trips over his feet, startling Simon. The dog makes a break for the bedroom and Will shoots an apologetic look at Hannibal through the wall before following after to direct Simon away from the bed.

“Why did you let me sleep on you for two—oh.” He takes the valerian root from Hannibal, regretfully, and lowers his voice. “Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“You were busy.” Hannibal pats his shoulder, and Will sits down on the edge of the bed and pops the stringy section of root into his mouth to grind it up with his teeth. He pulls a face as

the flavor erupts on his tongue. Hannibal still has no sympathy at all when it comes to the valerian root. This is already the fifth night this week Will has taken it, and he makes the same grimacing expression without fail every time. Hannibal even looks a little amused. “It’s one of my favorite things, to watch you enter into another world.”

Will hums something and then shakes his head, shivering and groaning pitifully around the disgusting funk sinking into his tongue. Hannibal’s hands find his shoulders for a few seconds, and then he leaves the room. Will furiously chews at the last of the root and swallows miserably as Hannibal re-enters and presses a cold glass of water into his hand.

“Ugh, God…God, oh, God.” Will swishes the water around in his mouth several times and then drinks greedily from the glass until the taste fades from his tongue and leaves only a bitter memory of it in his mouth.

“It’s not that bad, Will.”

“Have you been taking it for the past five nights?” Will glares at him even as Hannibal smiles and presses his lips into Will’s hair. He takes the glass from Will and leaves the room again. “All the compassion of a light bulb,” Will mutters under his breath. He brings his feet up onto the bed and waits for Hannibal to rejoin him with the tea. He cradles the hot drink in both hands and watches over the steaming surface as Hannibal casually undresses by the other side of the bed. Will smirks into the lip of the mug as Hannibal neatly folds each item of clothing as it comes off him.

Will bites his lip and jokes, “It must be so stressful for you when we have sex.”

“Messy people make better lovers,” Hannibal agrees, however subtly. “The lack of inhibition and the freedom to let go in that moment of passion works superbly in your favor.” He steps a knee onto the bed, dressed only in an undershirt and his boxers. Will sips more of his tea, sets it down on the nightstand, and inches closer to Hannibal.

“Your calculated grace works in your favor, too.”

Hannibal hums and says, “Thank you.”

“Are you going to work tomorrow?”

“Yes, Will.”

“I don’t suppose I could persuade you to stay home.”

“You may succeed in making me late, again.”

“I’ll take what I can get.” Will grins and nips at Hannibal’s shoulder. He moves back, considering. “I can’t remember when I stopped channeling you.”

“Does that bother you?”

“No, it’s just…Before it was like waking up from a dream or being drugged. This was…I felt okay.”

Hannibal smiles and palms Will's cheek before leaning in to kiss him softly, sweetly. He whispers, "Drink your tea, Will."

Will sits up and quickly drinks the warm tea. It washes down the last remnants of the valerian root, and once it's emptied, Will takes it into the kitchen to wash it and put it away. Before returning to bed, he brushes his teeth in the bathroom across the hall.

Hannibal sleeps soundly when he comes back. Madeline is curled up at his feet, and Will pauses for nearly a minute to contemplate snapping a picture on his phone. He lifts his IV stand so it doesn't make a sound and tiptoes into bed beside Hannibal, opting to leave Madeline where she is since Hannibal is asleep anyway. He grabs Hannibal's wrist and tucks it up beneath his shirt to rest on his stomach and turns to his left to face the edge of the bed.

He recalls the melding of the stags in his dream and presses his hand against Hannibal's through his shirt. His fingers curl slightly against his skin, and the arm around him tightens.

Sleepily, Hannibal says, "Will, the dog is sleeping on my feet."

"Yeah, she likes you." He feels Hannibal shift as he looks over his shoulder at the foot of the bed where Madeline has apparently fallen asleep on his feet. Will yawns, the God awful valerian root working its magic in his system. "That's what happens when dogs like you."

Hannibal's forehead presses into Will's hair from behind, and he huffs a sigh before drifting off again. After some time has passed and he's sure Hannibal won't wake, he chances a turn of his head and sees Madeline out like a light rolled over on her back. Will smiles and lays his head back down.

Somewhere in the hall one of the dogs snores; probably Penelope. He closes his eyes and sinks under into a beautiful stream leading into a restored countryside. Abigail and Mischa sit with Hannibal by the water making mud pies and shrieking their laughter when it splatters on their arms and pretty clean dresses. Will comes to them on a boat and kisses Hannibal firmly on the lips. The girls run up to the massive stone-spired building with the fish he caught as the dogs come running from the door they pass through. Hannibal says to him, "This place brings you a great deal of peace."

"I'm happy," Will assents. He slips his hand into Hannibal's. "Perfectly happy."

Hannibal tugs on his hand and whispers, "Come, Will."

They walk together up the trail. Will can never let go. No one will ever make him.

Chapter End Notes

> Lecter to Will in a letter from *Red Dragon*: "What a collection of scars you have. Never forget who gave you the best of them, and be grateful, our scars have the power to remind us that the past was real."

Aš tave myliu, mano gėlyte. > I love you, my little flower.

Hour For Magic

Chapter Summary

Price and Zeller go about business as usual at the crime lab.

Chapter Notes

We used to believe in the good old days/We still receive in little ways the things of kindness

Price coils the string around the axis of the gyroscope Brian keeps on his desk and listens to the soothing static coming from Bowman's office across the hall. Brian's apparent frustration with the sound tickles him, but he doesn't say anything. He just watches the man pace, casting irritated glances out the door. Brian flings his hands in a vague expression of impatience and marches three feet down the hall to knock on the door that opens when prompted and unleashes a steadier current of white noise.

Listening to their latest dispute with a smile on his face, Price winds the slack string around his finger and pulls the line out. The action undoes the neat spool around the steel rod at the center of the nifty little device. He takes a capped pen from the mug full of them and places the sturdy platform of the partially spinning object on the tiny circular base at the end of the ballpoint pen.

"Not this again, Zeller. Jack wants me to look at the Hobbs thing again, and the file is like three inches thick now that that kid turned up dead. The noise helps me focus."

Brian snorts, "At seventy decibels?"

Price rolls his eyes. He can practically hear Bowman rolling his, too.

"It's fifty at the *most*, you drama queen."

The gyroscope wobbles with the rotor's waning velocity. Price catches it in his palm when it tips over of the edge of the pen. He stands and rounds the desk. Bowman notices him straight away when he peeks out into the hallway.

"Tell him he's being ridiculous."

"Jimmy's incapable of telling a lie. It makes his nose grow."

Price frowns at Brian's teasing smirk and checks his watch. "Have you had lunch yet, Bowman?"

"Deflection is not synonymous with agreement," Brian snipes unhelpfully.

Bowman ignores him and also scans his watch for the time. He nods. "Yeah, I guess so. I'm way behind on the file, though. I shouldn't leave it." He looks back into his office, a light scowl on his face. "I'm supposed to go through the last three Ripper kills, too."

"We'll have a look at it," Price offers easily. Brian looks at him in a mixture of shock and incredulity.

Relieved but wary, Bowman asks, "You will?"

"We will?"

"Yeah, just until you get back." Price steps out of Brian's office and follows him to get the files. Brian catches his arm and gives him another exasperated look that Price just smiles at.

"You're saving my life, Jimmy. Thanks. I'll be back before the hour's up."

"For God's sake, at least shut that noise off before you go."

Bowman skips back into the room to switch the speakers hooked up to his computer off. He flies out of the room shrugging on his coat and jingling his keys in his pocket as he goes. Brian groans and mutters something under his breath like, "I hate playing the intern."

"Oh, come on. You've been griping about how Jack should have given us the Ripper case to look at anyway. It's not so awful. Besides," Price announces brightly, catching Brian's attention as he hoists the three bulky files under one arm. "I went through all your science toys already."

Brian heaves a sigh and takes one of the heavier files and the lightest one so they each carry a substantial amount. They close the door to Bowman's office and walk back towards Brian's office. He says, "Usually the gyroscope holds you over a lot longer."

"Your arguments with Bowman are more interesting," he retorts, plopping the files onto the desk. He makes some room for Brian to set the other two down. "What do you think Jack's looking for on the Hobbs case?"

"Proof that she helped her dad kill those girls. Don't know what he's got Lloyd looking into, but it's been months. If Abigail Hobbs did play some kind of part in the murders, the trail is well hidden or it doesn't exist." He sighs. "Why didn't he just give us one of the case loads instead of piling them both on Bowman?"

"Jack's a busy guy. He probably thought we were already on Hobbs."

"Oh, yeah, and he had us on Madchen last week; he probably forgot we handed in the report on Tuesday."

Brian opens the folder on the first of the three victims, Yusuf Vartanian, and sits down behind the desk. Price sits opposite him and opens the one on Gilbert Parish, the second victim they found strapped to the hood of his car. Ripper kills are usually pretty intense, but the Parish crime scene stands out in his mind especially because of how personal it had felt; the victim's head propped over the back of the car to look directly into his eyes. He shivers at the memory. Vartanian was like that, too; flagrantly ostentatious rather than poignantly artistic.

The final victim hadn't been so difficult to avoid. It was more of a standard display, out of the way but with a guaranteed discovery in sight. Price thumbs at the autopsy report labeled: Parish, Gilbert H. Cause of death was listed as exsanguination with shock put down as an antagonist. Parish and Vartanian suffered before they died, though their deaths did come relatively quickly.

Studying the M.E.'s report, Price says, "Interesting how these first two are a bit more interactive."

"Well, Ripper always displays the bodies. He wants the audience."

"Is that from one of Will's lectures?"

Brian glances up and then back down at his file on Vartanian, flipping to a page somewhere in the middle. "I may have dated one of his students."

"Brian," Price chides him halfheartedly.

"And may have helped her write a paper."

"I thought you hated playing the intern," he teases. Brian scoffs and rolls his eyes.

"She was cute. They're not that young when they get here, you know."

"When they get here, it's to further their education on serial killers and twisted minds, not to be preyed upon."

"You say that like I'm Nosferatu." Price shakes his head, hiding his smile by keeping his eyes trained on the file. "And we had a good time, thank you for asking. She was a nice girl."

"I'm sure she was, but as I was saying, there's something off about the most recent homicide." Brian angles his head to look at the third file when Price opens it. He flips through for the picture Beverly took when they first got to the scene. He taps it with his finger on the photograph when he finds it and flips it around to refresh Brian's memory.

"Right, Cary Villeneuve; um, he was a chef, and the other guys worked retail?"

"No, look at the differences between Vartanian and Parish versus Villeneuve. Vartanian was faced toward the street, and Parish was perched over the back of his car. We had to look at their faces just to process them, specifically their eyes." It took him weeks to forget Vartanian's eyes dangling freely from the optic nerves. "Villeneuve's eyes weren't even open when we found him."

“Okay.” Brian stands and rounds the desk to stand beside Price. He sets the opened file on Villeneuve on the far right and places the other two in chronological order from left to right. “So between Parish and Villeneuve, something about the presentation changes, but why?”

Price hums and glances at the shaky script of the field notes attached to Parish’s file.

“We still have the second-man theory going for Parish, right? But only for Parish, not for Vartanian or Villeneuve.” Brian nods, and Price rubs his chin.

“Um…” Brian claps his hands and closes his eyes. “All right, working hypothesis.”

“Go.”

“Ripper leaves Vartanian positioned facing the road like a taunt, right? Well, that’s how we saw it, but what if it’s like the thing with Budge? What if Ripper was challenging another serial killer to come out and play?”

Price nods, following the train of thought. “Our second man seeks out the Ripper, they do away with Parish, and then…”

“And then Ripper’s alone again for Villeneuve; artistic differences?”

Brian furrows his eyebrows and rubs his forehead vigorously.

“Maybe he was trying to see if they could work together; just to see if they could, you know? Receiving validation, or not receiving it, he doesn’t have that same audience to appeal to, so he goes back to leaving his regular kind of scene.”

“The audience,” Brian repeats, scrubbing the back of his hand along the stubble on his cheek. “How would Ripper know he had an admirer; how would he know this person was worth the risk of being found out?”

Price scans the witness reports in each file and says, “None of the witnesses named in these reports are the same.”

“Could he have seen crime scene photos on TattleCrime.com? Will said the Copycat reads it. Maybe he’s in on it, too.” Brian interrupts himself to laugh sardonically. “Yeah, great; we’ll throw in *another* elusive serial killer and we can’t even prove whether there definitely was a second person at the scene. Can we?”

Price confirms, “Not conclusively. No usable footprints or particulates in Towson and no traceable DNA evidence where Parish was killed.”

Brian groans and falls into the seat behind him. He puts his head in his hands. “Do you think there’s anything to that white noise stuff?”

“You’re not serious.”

“Bowman seems to swear by it,” he mutters.

“I’m pretty sure Bowman has Attention-Deficit Hyperactive Disorder. The static does actually help him concentrate.”

“Bowman, really? Well, I feel like a jerk.” He pushes himself to his feet and strides toward the door. “You want a soda or anything?”

“No, thanks.”

Brian shrugs and leaves, clearly agitated with the Ripper case. Price sympathizes completely. He’d love nothing more than to be good and done with this guy and his intricate patterns and untraceable M.O.s. A knock comes on the door, and Price turns to see Beverly peering in curiously. He waves her in.

“I thought Jack gave Bowman the Ripper case to look through.”

“He also gave him the Hobbs case.” Price raises his eyebrows once. “It’s not going well.”

“I’m pretty sure he meant to give Hobbs to Zeller. He really needs to fire that intern of his.”

“I don’t have an intern,” Brian says indignantly from the doorway. He walks back into the room with a Dr. Pepper.

“Not you; Jack. You were supposed to get the file on Hobbs, not Bowman.”

“Jack has an intern?” Price watches Brian figure out who it is in his head. He scrunches his nose. “Wait, not Petey. Is it Petey still?” Beverly nods, and Brian groans. “Well, no wonder we’ve been sitting on our hands.” He stomps out of the room again.

Price and Beverly share a humorous glance and then turn back to the files splayed open on the desk. Beverly walks around Price and leafs through Vartanian’s file.

“We were just thinking if the Ripper did have an accomplice for Parish, then it’s possible the first of this series of homicides was a provocation, or an invitation, depending on what angle you look at it from.” Beverly studies the photograph of Parish’s body in the morgue when Price mentions him. “Then we have Villeneuve, and the style’s back to what it was before.” He recalls Brian’s words. “He didn’t have to perform for a specific audience anymore; just us.”

“It wasn’t as showy as the first two,” Beverly observes. Price nods, and she continues, “If we found the accomplice, he could lead us to Ripper.”

“Theoretically,” he hedges. “It had crossed my mind that maybe Villeneuve was the accomplice, and Ripper terminated their partnership before it ever took off.”

Beverly frowns. “All right, so our second man could just be anybody on the street drawn to him out of some, what, skewed romantic ideology of murder?”

“Rose-tinted glasses, as it were, yes. But…”

“But he could have been baiting another murderer.” A wrinkle knits its way onto her forehead. “Like with Budge.”

“That’s what Brian said, yeah.”

She frowns at the cluttered desk and sinks into a chair. “You don’t think maybe Budge was trying to collaborate with the Ripper.”

“Why not? It’s totally feasible. Budge was set up in Baltimore; it’s possible he discovered Ripper’s identity and then tried to establish a kind of working relationship.”

He watches Beverly sink into a chair and work through it in her head. He goes through the motions, too, coming to a conclusion he had foreseen but had hoped to avoid. She doesn’t appear to want to say anything, but she takes up the file on Villeneuve and examines it with a deep frown on her face.

He hates to say it out loud, but he senses that she won’t. “Will confronted Budge at his shop, directly. Ripper probably already knew about him from Lounds’ blog, so if Budge went to kill him to impress Ripper, it may have worked in the reverse and drawn his attention specifically to Will.”

“He wasn’t at the Villeneuve crime scene,” she says softly.

“What?”

“He went on his leave of absence a few days before we found the guy. Jack tried to get him, but Dr. Lecter wasn’t having it. Will wasn’t anywhere near that crime scene.”

Slowly, Price says, “He wasn’t in the audience.”

Beverly stands abruptly, obviously shaken. “What if he’s just doing this to get to Jack? Lass went after him, so he killed her; now he’s got Will going after him, and Ripper wants Jack to think it’ll be even worse this time around. He’s threatening Jack, deliberately.”

“You think Parish could be just a ruse?”

“Ripper’s intelligent. He isn’t careless enough to be so obvious about anything that we could trace back to him.”

“None of this traces back to him; it only implicates Will, but that’s ridiculous.”

“Right,” Beverly agrees solemnly but with conviction. Less certainly, she says, “Ridiculous.”

Brian walks back into the office, finally. “What’s ridiculous?”

“Um, theories; working hypotheses,” Price mumbles distractedly. He flips through Villeneuve’s file and glances at the hollowed cranial cavity. “You speculated before that Ripper might be a cannibal,” he prompts in Beverly’s direction. “What do you eat brains with?”

“I ate fried lamb brains once. My aunt is kind of weird.” Brian frowns at the picture and swipes his Dr. Pepper from the desk.

Price asks, “Your aunt Patricia or your aunt Louise?”

Brian pops the hole atop the soda can open and pours the fizzing drink into a paper cup with ice from the break room. He holds it off to the side so the carbonation doesn’t get on the documents. He replies, “Oh, my aunt Celeste, actually; my mom’s aunt.”

“So your great aunt,” Price corrects him blandly.

“Yeah, whatever.” Brian waves a noncommittal hand. “She knits me hats every Christmas; she’s all right.”

“Not great like good, great like…Oh, you’re being purposely dense. That’s helpful. Nice to see that yelling at Jack’s intern substantially improved your mood.”

“I didn’t yell at Petey; I just kindly reminded him that manila folders like these bad boys here contain highly sensitive information and that he’ll never make it to NASA if he doesn’t step up his game.”

Beverly snorts, “NASA?”

“Some idiot told me that on my second day interning in my junior year of college. Now I’ve passed it along, and he can be the idiot that tells the next horrible intern. It’s the circle of life.” He sips his Dr. Pepper and purses his lips around the taste of it as he swishes it around in his mouth.

“I keep mouth wash in my desk, Brian.”

He swallows and bites back a grimace. “Sweet; it’s very sweet.”

“Do you guys always just get miles off topic every time one of you is reunited with the other?” Beverly smirks at Price over Vartanian’s file and then switches it out for the one on Parish.

“My brain needs to recalibrate to his presence, and that usually takes a few minutes.”

Brian scoffs, “*Your* brain needs recalibrating to deal with *my* presence?”

Before Price can cleverly retort, Beverly asks, “How did you two meet anyway?”

Price shoots Brian a questioning glance that says, *Do you want to take that, or should I?*

Brian shrugs and says, “Grad school, right? Well, it was grad school for me. Jimmy gave a guest lecture on human osteology while my pathology professor was out with some debilitating disease or other.”

“Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease,” Price answers expertly.

“Yeah, that’s right; she smoked like twelve packs a day.”

“Since she was in high school; tragic.”

Beverly says, “So, what, you dragged him out for coffee after because he was that brilliant?”

“Nobody got *dragged* anywhere. I offered to grade papers and the like for his other classes. You had four others on top of that one, didn’t you?”

Price nods, setting the Villeneuve file down and pinching the bridge of his nose.

“But he was that brilliant,” Beverly concludes teasingly.

“I owned that classroom,” Price recounts, fondly. Brian glances at him, hearing the nostalgic tone that creeps into his voice.

Brian folds and concedes, “Brilliantly.”

Beverly grins at Brian and then turns it on Price. “I didn’t know you used to teach.”

“It was something to do when this felt like a bad idea. That was ten years ago already. Jack wasn’t the head of Behavioral Sciences yet, so my forensic credentials weren’t in very high demand.”

“He’d already made a name for himself with this series of publications about the degradation of nuclear DNA in cornified hair shafts that were kind of ahead of their time. You didn’t think I read them,” Brian says, directing his attention back to Price. “But I had to because you wouldn’t talk about anything else.”

Embarrassed, Price shrugs. To Beverly, he says, “It was exciting stuff, and it never took off. Who was I supposed to talk to but the bushy-tailed grad student who *offered* to grade papers for me?”

“Bushy-tailed,” Brian snorts. He takes another careful sip of his soda.

“Are you still avoiding Coke because of the thing with Braddock?”

“You did not smell that unholy concoction. You don’t know my pain.”

Beverly checks her watch. “My lunch is almost over. I’ve got to get back. Are you guys keeping the Ripper files?”

“Yeah, I left Jack a note on his monitor. Bowman can keep Hobbs for now, and we’ll work these. I’m not giving them up unless Jack comes himself and says he wants us on the other one.”

“Good idea,” Beverly says from the doorway. She locks eyes with Price, a question there on her worried face. He nods his head; she looks away and then at Brian. “Bring them by the lab later if I’m not still combing through blood and guts.”

“You got it.”

She leaves, and Price contemplates the files. He skims through the reports line by line trying to find a proper place to begin.

“So what was that about?”

Well, so much for subtle.

He decides to be direct. “We think Ripper’s baiting Will.”

Brian opens his mouth to say something but stops, dropping his eyes thoughtfully to Villeneuve’s file. He walks around the desk and sits behind it, placing the moderately thick stack of bound documents in front of him. Price sits, too, and looks out the window at the quad. He expects Brian to offer some kind of argument, but the silence continues. Instead of challenging Price, Brian asks, “Do we tell Jack?”

“Do we need to?”

“Evidence,” Brian mumbles to himself, turning Vartanian’s file to the side and then pushing it away to look at the remaining file on Parish. “It all goes back to this guy, doesn’t it?”

“It’s the most apparent break in the pattern, and it’s not much to go off in the first place.”

“He makes sure of that,” Brian grumbles, closing the file and tipping his head back to scan the ceiling with his eyes.

“Ripper’s been so meticulous in the past; he only ever mucked it with Lass. She discovered him; she forced him to break his pattern. Beverly said he could have done all this just to threaten Jack with his latest protégé.”

Brian sighs, “His latest protégé being Will. So wait then…” He rubs at his temples. “Is he or isn’t he actually courting an accomplice? Ripper, I mean.”

“He could be courting Will, however unlikely Will would be to actually go for it.”

“Doesn’t that kind of make you wonder, though?”

“About Will?”

“Well, yeah, but about Lass, too.” Brian sits up in his chair and neatly stacks the three folders on top of each other. “He must have known how close she was; he must have been right there when she put two and two together.”

“You think someone in her personal life?”

“I think someone in her professional life.” Brian stands up, impassioned. “Someone who had eyes and ears on the case and knew exactly where she was on the developments.”

“So, Jack,” Price deadpans. Brian deflates.

“No, someone she interrogated; a witness or a suspect, or…or a consult, I don’t know. Who did she talk to? Do we know?”

“Jack scoured through all the timekeeping documents Lass kept, handwritten and typed. There’s nothing about her whereabouts the day she disappeared. Her electronic logs were wiped out going back a whole week before anyone knew she was missing. There was a power outage in the building that didn’t get fixed for almost an hour; something about a fire in the basement, I think. We kept a lot of noxious chemicals on the lower levels. This place was like a nuclear plant in those days.”

“It wasn’t *that* long ago. *I* remember it. Did they look into recovering her notes?”

“Some guys from IT took a crack at it; just a red herring. There wasn’t anything missing and none of it held incriminating information against anyone, though I think her sister was having an affair. Not sure why that got put into the report, but I remember reading it.”

“I remember that, too.” Brian frowns. “If Petey wasn’t straight out of college, I would suspect him.”

“Hey, guys.” They turn to address the knock on the door. Bowman points to the Ripper files. “I can take them back now.”

“You’re just on Hobbs now. I talked to Jack.” Price glances at Brian, and Brian ignores him. “Petey’s a nuisance.”

“He’ll be worth his salt one of these days,” Bowman says wistfully. Bowman interned, too, once. They weren’t his best days. “But really? Jack cleared it?”

“Absolutely,” Brian lies. “Scout’s honor.” He walks to the door and closes it as Bowman turns to leave for his office. “Before you say anything, yes, I was an Eagle Scout; no, my scoutmaster was not overly qualified.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything.” Price shakes his head.

“Uh-huh.”

“That is a precious picture, though; little Brian Zeller in his Boy Scout uniform. How many badges do you need to be an Eagle Scout?”

“Twenty-one,” Brian mumbles. Price puts his chin in his hand to hide his laughter and fails miserably. Brian frowns at him. “You really do need recalibration time, don’t you? Should I leave the room?”

“No, no,” Price chuckles in spite of himself. He takes a deep breath and sputters on the laugh bubbling up in his chest. Brian shakes his head and goes to sit down. “All right, I’m okay. I’m…Yes, I’m better now. I needed a good laugh, thank you.”

“I’m glad my past exploits as a good citizen amuse you. It was only because my older brother did it.”

“I’m sure they were all very proud of you.”

“It’s a hot topic at Thanksgiving, and every time I bring a girl home.”

Price subtly wipes a tear from the corner of his eye, and Brian, luckily, does not see it. He clears his throat and says, “So we think the Parish crime scene will give us the Ripper, is that the deduction we’ve come to?”

Obviously grateful for the subject change, Brian huffs, “*My* deduction is that this whole thing has been orchestrated to make us *think* Ripper had an accomplice just so we would think more about that particular scene. Remember how Will didn’t think about the second car?”

Price goes through that day again in his head. “You think what he was actually keeping from Jack is that he knew it was for him; that all of these three kills were for him?”

“Well, it makes some kind of sense. We bring Will in to look at the Vartanian case; he gets sick right after doing that thing that he always does.” Price nods; Will had never gotten sick looking at a body before. “Then we have Parish, and he gives Jack the ordinary rundown, everything that we can see and conclude from just the physical evidence, what was left of it.”

“He leaves out the second car because he wants Jack to accuse him of holding back?”

Brian specifies, “Holding back on one theory when he’s actually holding back on another.”

“But why?”

“It’s a double bluff. He’s always been a little crazy; he knows it, and he knows everyone else knows it, too. A diversion like this is the last thing he needs on top of Freddie Lounds’ blog and the thing with Garrett Jacob Hobbs. If we start to doubt his credibility just as he’s closing in on the Ripper, he’ll be in the wind again, and we’ll have another repeat of Miriam Lass, except Will takes the fall this time.”

Favoring this theory, Price asks, “And Villeneuve?”

“Will wasn’t there, was he?” Brian scans through the file, and Price shakes his head.

“No, he’d just cashed in on his vacation time. You think Ripper might have known that he wouldn’t be there to see it?”

“Well, he hasn’t been working the Madchen case, so it’s possible. I mean, someone could’ve leaked it to Freddie Lounds that he’s on the bench,” Brian says, too forcibly nonchalant in his tone to sound conversational. “I wouldn’t put it past her if she knew about Will’s time off or if she was keeping tabs on Will just to know what he’s doing with it.”

Price watches Brian pace again. Instead of mentioning the way his hands ball up into fists at the mention of Freddie Lounds, Price tells him lightly, “You’re going to wear down the carpet doing that.”

“Doing what?” Brian stops walking and looks down at his shoes. “Oh, right.” He sighs, and a loud burst of static punctuates the long exhale. “Jesus, again.”

“We don’t have to stay in here, you know. The building has other places to go that aren’t within shouting distance of Bowman’s office.”

Brian tosses a glance toward the files on the desk and shrugs. “Break room?” Price follows him out of the room and down the hall away from the static trickling out from behind Bowman’s closed door. Brian glances over his shoulder at the low muffled sound. “He really has ADHD?”

“Have you ever seen him at a lecture or press conference? He can’t sit still, the poor guy. Jack heaping two cases on him at once probably stressed him out beyond explanation.”

“Huh,” Brian muses, turning into the atrium. “Do you think he takes Ritalin for it?”

“I don’t know if he actually has it.”

“It would make sense, though, wouldn’t it?” Brian waves at someone Price doesn’t recognize across the atrium. They walk into the break room, and Brian goes straight for the coffee maker.

“What happened with that girl you said you were dating?”

“Uh, Gretchen, you mean?”

“Was there another one of Will’s students you dated?” Price takes the coffee Brian pours for him and adds creamer.

“Oh, from Will’s class, yeah. That was Rebecca. We went out a few times; mostly, I think I was tutoring her. I’m not sure how that happened.” Price shakes his head and follows Brian out of the break room and back through the atrium. “You feel like going outside?”

“A bit chilly out today, isn’t it?”

“The coffee’s hot; you’ll be fine. Come on.”

It’s cloudy out, but there’s no rain today, amazingly. The spot immediately outside the building isn’t cold because the building obstructs the passage of wind coming in from the east. Price drinks his coffee; it does warm him up some. Out of nowhere, Brian says, too cheerfully for Price’s taste, “I’ve known you for ten years, and I’ve never seen you in a relationship.”

“I was newly divorced when we met; that was fourteen years of happiness,” he mutters sarcastically.

“I thought you and Olivia got along?”

“Not when we were married; well, for a while. There were good times. I think we just weren’t compatible as husband and wife. We’re better friends now than when we were together, though.”

Brightly, Brian says, “We’ve got to get you a girl, man. It’d do you good.”

“Relationships really aren’t my forte,” Price insists. He leans against the wall lining the balcony ledge and drinks his coffee. He looks over his shoulder at the ground two stories down. “Though I guess they’re not really yours either, are they?”

Brian shrugs and drinks his coffee. He goes and leans his forearms on the wall and looks down. A few cars pass by on the street below.

“What do we tell Jack about the Ripper thing?”

Price looks up over the roof and shakes his head. “We don’t know what Will was thinking that day in Towson.”

“What are we doing?” Price returns Brian’s expectant glance. “Because this feels like we’re protecting Will, and we shouldn’t be doing that.”

“We aren’t,” Price replies firmly. “We have a limited amount of data and a lot of holes in an entirely circumstantial theory. Even if we’re right, and Will did know Ripper was reaching out to him, it doesn’t prove anything, does it? It just proves that some homicidal maniac who’s also probably a cannibalistic brain-eater has found himself fixated on the guy profiling him.”

“Cannibalistic brain-eater,” Brian snorts. “We should start calling him that.”

“It might be best to keep it out of the tabloids.” He gives Brian a meaningful look that he doesn’t understand right away. He gulps and averts his eyes once he gets it. Price adds, as if he hadn’t stopped talking at all, “Imagine the panic it’d kick up.”

Brian asks, hesitantly, “How did you know I talked to her?”

“I inferred it. You clam up and get that guilty look on your face whenever someone mentions her in a sentence, yet you go out of your way to voice your disapproval of her, and I got the feeling after a while it wasn’t because of how she constantly badmouths Will on her site.”

“Not that I approve of that either,” Brian mutters, drinking his coffee. “It wasn’t a thing so you know. I thought it could be, but she’s just…ambitious and devilish and awful and about thirteen kinds of amazing.” He shakes his head, disgusted at the veracity of each new adjective he rambles off. Scrunching his eyes closed, he adds, “And also flexible. I’m a terrible person.”

“You learned your lesson.” He’s careful not to add anything that doesn’t need saying, like the part where a man was killed. Brian’s moped about it in a solitary silence long enough, and he’s likely explored that particular avenue of guilt and regret before. “We all make mistakes.” Price sighs and turns to lean his elbows on the wall, too. “You blabbed to a tabloid journalist; Jack unwittingly put Lass behind enemy lines; Will attracted a homicidal lunatic.”

“That’s not any way to talk about Dr. Lecter,” Brian deadpans. Price’s lip quivers at one side, and he barks out a laugh. Brian laughs, too, relieved to be done with the tension of what’s clearly still an uncomfortable memory for him.

“I see what you meant before, when you said they were weird.”

Still smiling widely from his bout of laughter, Brian says, “They are; they’re so weird.”

“But it makes sense, too, I think. I don’t really know Lecter, but...” He shrugs. “Well, I guess I don’t really know Will either. They look right standing next to each other, though; it’s hard to explain it.”

“Kind of weirdly grounded,” Brian agrees.

“That’s just your word for them, isn’t it? They’re just weird to you.”

“Happy couples are always really weird to me.” Zeller wrinkles his eyebrows and looks out again over the balcony. He huffs a short chuckle. “It’s weird thinking of them as a happy couple.”

“I’ll give you that one.” Price raises his coffee cup, half empty now. He checks his watch. “Bowman’s probably going to come looking for us soon.”

“Why?”

“Oh, because you lied about Jack giving us the send-off to take the Ripper case and that miserable intern you so love to abuse is going to go tracking us down to smite us with Jack’s osmotic fury.”

“That’s actually a really profound way to sum up Petey’s job description.” Zeller rubs at his beard. “Where were you when I was a starving college student penning my résumé looking for summer work?”

“Probably teaching and getting divorced.” Price waves him away from the balcony and back into the building. They walk through the halls until they reach the fork in the architecture that leads Price toward his office and Brian toward his. Price ambles quietly into his orderly office without much fuss from anyone and sets down his coffee. He rubs at his eyes, tired for all that he hasn’t been sleeping lately.

He’s actually happy Will’s decided to take some time off, though he’s taken more than Price would have expected from someone so dedicated to his work. It’s probably Dr. Lecter’s influence more than anything; Price has years of experience that tell him a spouse sometimes takes better care of the other’s health than her, or his, own. When he and Olivia were in the earlier stages of their marriage, she was always the one to make him stay home if he had a stomach bug. He would miss those days if the good ones hadn’t been so few and far between.

Will and Dr. Lecter’s relationship, while being none of his business in any sense of the word, is strange to him. Even after so much time passed since Williamsport and the two stuck together, and obviously gelled so *well*, Price hadn’t been able to shake it. He’s almost impressed by them; by how uncharacteristically lighthearted Will becomes in Hannibal’s presence and by how weirdly grounded, to use Brian’s words, Dr. Lecter becomes in turn. He’d only really seen them together in passing glimpses and hadn’t ever really stared except the time they full-on made out in the airport.

But that hadn't been his fault; Beverly had made him do it.

He can't put his finger on the exact word he would like to use, but impressed is the one that comes closest. Brian would probably tease him for it, but it's true.

Just standing in the middle of a busy crime scene with their heads bowed together and almost touching or at the front of a viewing room looking down into a casket, they exuded this rare kind of intimacy Price had never seen two adults express before—much less two adults routinely exposed to death and destruction. They had each been in situations where they had to kill or be killed, and they clung to each other with a fatalistic urgency that only appeared easy and second nature on the outside. Price could see it; he could see how much of a strain the work could be on their relationship. He had suffered that burden with Olivia and made her suffer it, too, unfortunately.

Price considers Brian's words from earlier.

He's always been a little crazy; he knows it, and he knows everyone else knows it, too.

Dr. Lecter would know, surely, if there was something wrong with Will. Of course he would. He recalls what he said before and what Beverly said, too.

Will attracted a homicidal lunatic.

None of this traces back to him; it only implicates Will, but that's ridiculous.

"Ridiculous," Price mumbles under his breath. He scratches his head and looks around his office. He laughs a little bit, this side of hysterically. "That's ridiculous."

He sits behind his desk to call Olivia. It's been a while since he heard her voice.

Moonlight Drive

Chapter Summary

Keeping up appearances with Hannibal Lecter.

Chapter Notes

Nothing left open, and no time to decide/We've stepped into a river on our moonlight drive/Let's swim to the moon/Let's climb through the tide/You reach your hand to hold me, but I can't be your guide

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal meets Jack at the corner of Aliceanna Street for the lunch Jack insisted on treating him to. There's a chill in the air that Hannibal combats by pulling up his coat collar as he steps up onto the sidewalk. Jack walks in step with him to the front entrance of Pierpoint Restaurant, turns to Hannibal, and says, "I'm glad you could make it."

"It would be rude of me not to." Hannibal holds the door for Jack and follows him in. He adds, "A man has to eat, after all."

"Yes, he does." They follow a young hostess to a table Jack reserved for them, and Hannibal folds his coat and sets it on the empty seat beside him; Jack drapes his over the back of his chair. The restaurant has not yet reached full occupancy, but there is a sizeable crowd already in for the twelve o' clock rush.

The server comes to take their drink orders and fixates slightly on Hannibal even as Jack requests a glass of Sauvignon Blanc. Hannibal had planned on having water to stay keen for his meeting in the next hour at Port Haven, but he takes his cues from Jack. If a federal agent has no problem drinking wine with his lunch, Hannibal will not miss the opportunity to sample the restaurant's Chardonnay. It will pair excellently with the smoked crab cakes he plans on ordering.

Hannibal scans the server's nametag as he turns to fetch them their drinks; Philippe. He saw him working the previous times that he came in with Will. The man must recognize him.

"Will mentioned this place once or twice before he went on leave." Jack gestures with his menu before flipping through it. "Have you been?"

“He brought me.” Anticipating some kind of acknowledgement of the fact from their server, Hannibal says, “Will was taking a class here.”

Jack looks up from the green section of the menu, surprised. “Was he?”

“I think he felt the need to keep up in the kitchen come dinnertime.”

Laughing, Jack agrees with him. Their wine is brought to the table. Hannibal recites his order without touching the menu once, and after a moment more of deliberation, Jack decides on the diver scallops. Philippe pauses awkwardly after taking down the order and then turns to Hannibal, though he’d been facing him the bulk of the time.

“You’re Lecter; Will’s boyfriend. Oh, partner, I mean.”

“Either is fine.” Partner sounds less sophomoric to his ears, but he isn’t particularly in the mood to argue semantics with a stranger. A touch annoyed, he says, “I seem to recall Will talking about a Philippe on occasion. Did he mean you?”

His pale skin flushes bright red. He’s fond of Will then; Hannibal is glad to have never heard of him.

“I started working here right around when he came in for lessons. He’s a nice guy.” Hannibal watches him expectantly, infinitesimally narrowing his eyes in a silent dare. Philippe shifts his gaze toward Jack, remembering. “Oh, I’ll take these to the back. Smoked crab cakes and pan caramelized scallops, right?” He turns and leaves for the kitchen after catching sight of the scrawled note on his pad of paper. He bumps his hip on a counter top right before disappearing into the kitchen.

“Will’s got an admirer,” Jack muses. He sips at his wine sparingly.

“So it would seem.”

“How is Will anyway? I spoke to him on the phone about a week ago. He sounded a bit high strung.”

Not dismissively, Hannibal says, “He is unused to sitting on his hands all day. The dogs help to quiet his mind, but he is a man of action.”

“So he’s eager to get back to the field.”

“I would hesitate to go that far.” Hannibal tastes the wine, lets it sink into his palate.

“What would you say he is then?”

“Agitated; Will is highly agitated. Being ousted onto the sidelines suits him about as much as it suits you or me. We are not men to let the world pass us by.”

A light tone in his question, Jack asks, “He’s going stir-crazy; is that your official opinion, doctor?”

“I have no official opinion of him. I gave that mission up quite some time ago.”

“I’d say that’s a good thing for the sake of your relationship, but I’m not sure I wouldn’t like to see what sort of notes you keep on him now that you know him so well.”

“I don’t keep notes on Will, Jack.”

“If you did, I meant.”

Hannibal makes work of fidgeting with the silverware rolled up in his napkin, looking for all the world like the guilty spouse Jack thinks him to be. He clears his throat. “When we first met I told him I couldn’t switch it off.” Jack leans forward in his chair, listening attentively. “It annoys him to no end.”

“I know you think it would be better for him if he stuck to teaching from here on out,” Jack says, using a delicate tone of voice that one might use with a confidante; or one that might single him out as a possible confidante. Hannibal anticipated the underhanded maneuver; he had set the conversation up that way. “But we both know, regardless of how we feel about it, that he wants to come back to his work. From what you’ve seen of his recovery so far, do you think he can handle it?” Hannibal bristles, and Jack puts his hands up in defense. “I’m not asking for specifics; it’s not part of our working relationship anymore. Just, do you think he’ll be okay if I put him out there again?”

Hannibal pretends to consider it, and then he does so seriously. Their food comes in the midst of his silence, and he unravels the cloth napkin from his silverware. The crab cakes smell earthy and warm with a hint of cooked dough. Will makes them better now that he’s had sufficient time to practice and the leniency to alter the recipe in a way that best pleases both himself and Hannibal.

Staring intently at his plate, he says, “I think returning to his work with you will present an unnecessary shock to his mental health but that given time…” His eyes jump back up to meet Jack’s. He sighs. “Given time he would adapt as he had before.”

“So he can manage it.”

“Not indefinitely,” Hannibal mutters disdainfully. He shakes his head once, curtly; a rebuff for his sharp tone meant for Jack to see. “Soon it will be too much for him to bear, and there is no way for us to know when that moment will come or what it will do to him when it does.”

“You think he could suffer a breakdown?”

“What do you call his episode at the LeBeau residence?”

“No, I saw him after. He was coherent and aware of the situation. I don’t think he broke down. I think he came close,” Jack concedes, taking a bite of his scallops. He chews his food and swallows before speaking again. “But he was okay, after the fact. We talked, and he knew what he did and why it happened.”

Hannibal breathes slowly in and out through his nose, tries another bite of the crab cakes, though he's lost his appetite, and takes a slow drink of his wine. He hadn't wanted to tell Jack anything he didn't already know in a roundabout way.

"He lost time after Wells." He pauses and waits for Jack to ask. He doesn't disappoint.

"What are you talking about?"

"He seemed fine to you then, didn't he?" Hannibal looks up at the stunned expression on Jack's face. "Looking at that totem pole undid something previously secure in Will's mind; he dissociated from it in order to protect himself, and he drove three hours to my practice, unwittingly, looking for a safe place from the darkness he found himself engulfed in."

A long silence drags between them, and briefly, Hannibal worries that perhaps he has revealed too much too soon. He reasons that he can get away with it on account of the nature of their visit. Jack will go to Alana with this information that he has received, and while that poses a slight problem, he had told her in their consultation last week of Will's trouble with the Wells case. He can get away with it, elegantly.

Jack recovers from the shock and assumes a grave expression. "Why wasn't I informed of this?"

"I have different obligations now that I am no longer on your payroll, Jack."

"No longer on my…" Jack drops his silverware, forcefully enough to catch the attention of the entire restaurant. Checking the volume of his voice, he says, "Your responsibility as a psychiatrist trumps whether you're his boyfriend or partner or whatever the hell you want to call each other."

"Calm yourself." Hannibal surprises himself with the emphatic, stern quality of his command. He is somehow less surprised that Jack heeds him. They are in public; to do anything other than what Hannibal tells him would appear unreasonable, and while Jack is many things, he is not entirely mule headed. "My responsibility—and authority—as a psychiatrist are what persuaded Will to take a much needed break in the first place. I told you before that the mirror neurons in his brain allow him to reflect and visualize in ways that we ourselves could never grasp. When his empathy becomes too much for him, he must shut down in favor of self-preservation; you saw it happen in Williamsport when he assaulted James Casson."

Jack accepts Hannibal's line of neatly articulated manipulation, if grudgingly so. He eats more of his food, and Hannibal follows his lead, wanting to utilize as much of his lunch hour as possible to actually eat his lunch. The more Jack lets Hannibal's explanation sink in, the more he begins to believe in the logic; the more he believes in the logic, the more he believes Hannibal was justified in keeping the incident to himself, regardless of whether he believes he is actually in the wrong.

Hannibal can picture what Jack must be thinking; what he must be thinking about Will's temperament and personality and what he must be thinking about Hannibal's flawed yet sensible approach to handling Will when he very adamantly does not want to be handled.

Jack can see how Will would have begged Hannibal not to out him in case Jack saw it as a point of weakness or instability. He can see how Hannibal must have wanted to tell someone, Alana maybe, but couldn't out of some biased, entirely unprofessional loyalty to Will.

Hannibal had given Will up as a patient because of that loyalty; he had defied the rules of his trade and publicly confessed to the truth of their feelings for one another before their relationship had ever taken off.

Jack had seen Hannibal out of his element yet in control of the situation. He trusts his judgment as he did at Casson's memorial service in the aftermath of Will's seizure. Hannibal takes another bite of the crab cakes. Will's really are so much better.

After internally struggling to accept whatever thought he had been ruminating over in silence, Jack asks, "Are his problems entirely psychological?"

"We have considered the possibility of dementia, though he has decided to wait until Georgia Madchen is caught before consulting with another physician." Jack nods in understanding. "All I can say with certainty is that medical examinations to date have come up dry and that he desperately wishes there had been something to find by now."

"I don't blame him for not wanting to be crazy."

"Will is not crazy," Hannibal argues with an audible frown in his voice. "He simply understands what could happen to him if there is no immediate solution to his problem; he foresees what his life will be like when you and others like you begin to see him more as damaged goods than as a person with any sort of value to him."

"You think that's all he has to offer?"

"It's all he thinks he has to offer," Hannibal murmurs, purposely looking down at his plate to avoid Jack's eyes. "I think he is incapable of letting go, whether it would save him or not. He is incredibly reckless with his health."

He watches Jack; he sees the hopeful glimmer shiver across the surface of him. Before it can fade away into obscurity the way Hannibal fears, if only for a second, that it might, Jack sighs.

"Is it worth anything that doing this gives him some kind of comfort?"

"Short term, I suppose he could take solace in it, yes. However, in the long run, I'm not sure how much the satisfaction of saving lives and catching murderers would assuage him."

Jack rubs his chin with his hand and contemplates the remaining food left on his plate. Hannibal subtly checks the time on his watch. They've about half an hour before Hannibal needs to head back for his appointment with Dr. Pearce.

"After he shot Hobbs, I've wondered if Will may have gotten too close to it, too close to…"

"Death," Hannibal finishes for him. Jack pales slightly but hides it behind his wine glass.

“You called it pure empathy, what he has,” Jack says as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “If he looked at these crimes as if he did them, could he become convinced after a while that he had?”

“You’re referring to Dr. Sutcliffe.”

“Beth LeBeau shook him up because he thought he killed her. We could prove physically that Will hadn’t killed Sutcliffe, but the look in his eyes when we got there to check him.” Jack looks up briefly at the ceiling. “He almost looked resigned to it, like if that had been his fate, he would’ve accepted it and gone with us quietly.”

“He hasn’t felt like himself,” Hannibal agrees mildly. Quietly, he adds, “I went with him to his first visit, but he had refused my company that night.”

Jack is quick on the uptake of what Hannibal is really telling him. “He must have been glad you weren’t there.”

“But Donald was, unfortunately.” Hannibal sighs, dropping his gaze to the table. “His death is unfortunate, but I am relieved, even now, that it was him rather than Will.” He pauses and hesitantly, truly uncertain of whether he should be so brash as to say it aloud in Jack’s presence, tacks on, “That must paint me as quite a monster.”

It doesn’t faze him. Much like his many wasted cannibal puns at the dinner table, the comment glances right off. Hannibal is grateful but also petulantly irritated. Jack carries on, oblivious.

“If it had been Bella in his place, I would feel the same way.” Jack stops and looks off to the side as if becoming aware of something significant. Hannibal chooses not to trifle with it as his train of thought has likely taken a turn for the sentimental, and while it works in his favor, it is not important enough to dwell on. “You know, the reason I actually asked you to lunch today wasn’t so we could discuss Will. Well, it was, but not in the way that we ended up discussing him.”

That admission does catch Hannibal’s attention. He had been positive Jack’s only goal in cornering Hannibal in public was to inveigle information out of him about Will’s progress or lack thereof. Hannibal is caught off-guard, so he lies.

“I had thought you merely wanted to have lunch.”

“I enjoy your company, doctor, but Baltimore is a bit out of the way for a lunch to just be a lunch.”

Hannibal hums in understanding. “Will would say that, in the beginning.” Jack gets the wrong idea about what Hannibal means with that statement but does nothing to correct him. He quite enjoys watching the man squirm.

Jack clears his throat. “Actually, I wanted to apologize.”

“For what?” Hannibal frowns, confused.

Jack accepts the bill when it hits the table and pays it immediately before Philippe can ask whether they will be splitting. He hovers for a few seconds and then scuttles off, aware that he has walked in on a private conversation. Hannibal watches his retreating back and thinks of Franklin as he battles his urge to sneer. Jack follows his line of vision, and visibly unimpressed with his display, says, “I’m pretty sure you don’t have anything to worry about.”

“Worry isn’t the correct emotion.”

Will would laugh at his immaturity if he were here; he would make a well-timed joke about Hannibal just being hungry or *peckish, whatever.*

Beautiful, clever Will, his beautiful, clever partner.

Jack shakes his head, and he looks slightly, strangely endeared to Hannibal’s unexpected plight. “You should take it as a compliment.”

Hannibal can see the rationality in that; he can see that the man provides little in the way of competition and so, syllogistically, he can see that he poses no threat to his relationship with Will. The logic does nothing to take the bad taste out of his mouth. He would like to show Philippe just what exactly Will is capable of and see how much he wants him then. He wants him to see Will hold the knife that drains all the blood from his body and then in his final moments alive, watch as Hannibal touches Will, fucks him, and unravels him; he wants him to watch.

“Dr. Lecter?”

“I apologize. My mind wandered.” He covers his tracks quickly and checks his watch as if he hadn’t been counting the seconds since he last scanned it for the time. “I have a meeting in about twenty minutes; a new patient and her former doctor.”

“I imagine it’s difficult to keep up your professional life what with Will on the mend.” Jack stands and grabs his coat off the back of his chair. Hannibal takes the final sip of his wine and gathers up his coat from the chair beside him before stepping out from behind the table and slipping it on. He follows Jack to the door without paying Philippe another glance where he stands by the kitchen staring after him.

When they get outside, Hannibal says, “About as difficult as it is for you, I suppose.”

He catalogues Jack’s changing expressions and saves every one of them for later use. He tips his chin and turns to leave, but Jack catches his arm before he can. In one breath he says, “I wanted to apologize for the way I’ve handled your relationship with Will.” He releases Hannibal’s arm, and Hannibal’s mind blanks for the proper response. “There was a lot about it I didn’t understand, and I got it in my head that I had any right to judge you or your happiness.”

Hannibal swallows the lump in his throat that might be confusion or sentiment or leftover crab; he isn’t sure. Jack shakes his head.

With some reluctance, Jack adds, “I thought what he needed was a firm foundation to keep his feet under him, but maybe he just needed someone he could trust to catch him when the ground gave out. He sees a lot more than I ever give him credit for, which is saying something.”

“Yes,” Hannibal mumbles, stepping aside to allow a few patrons of the restaurant to pass them up on the sidewalk. Reeling still, he says, “Thank you, Jack.”

“I don’t know if Will told you about the little chat we had, but I asked him not to tell you that I was going to do this. I just wanted to be able to tell you myself.”

“Why in person? Will is much more accessible, geographically speaking.”

“Will is also on break, and I’ve been doing my damnedest to honor that.”

“That was courteous of you.” Hannibal pulls his gloves out occupy his fingers and his vision. “He was worried you might be growing impatient with him.”

“We’ve been spoiled having him around so much.” Jack nods his head. “But I think the team savors the challenge of solving one without him. It’s nice to know we can, anyway, when the occasion calls for it.”

“You managed just fine before you began to employ the use of his skills.”

“His skills are second to none, doctor. Even if we do all right without him, we always want to have the best.”

They begin walking towards Hannibal’s car, though he doesn’t know where Jack parked. Hannibal says nothing more, but Jack claps him on the shoulder as he unlocks his car. He had no idea they were at that point in their relationship. He has half a mind to say so, but Jack wears a strange emotion in his eyes when he turns to look at him.

“We only ever want the best for ourselves. Don’t we, Dr. Lecter?”

“Innately, yes; Spencer called it survival of the fittest.”

“Will is the best at what he does, and you come highly recommended from every psychiatrist not just in the state of Maryland but from several overseas.”

“Are you saying we would breed superior offspring, Jack?”

Hannibal cracks a smile at the surprised huff the comment earns him from Jack. He says, “If that were possible, I’m sure you would. What I’m getting at is: if Will thinks you’re the best there is for him and if you feel the same way about him, then I won’t stand in your way. I wouldn’t entertain the idea of trying.”

It is a wise decision. Hannibal would like to know if Jack senses the danger he would be inviting if he did think to try and separate them; it wouldn’t have been entirely unintentional if Hannibal had been sending those signals out. Will brings out the primitive beast within him

at the best of times. Will enjoys his primitive nature; he revels in matching it. He revels in matching Hannibal at every opportunity and sometimes outdoing him.

“I don’t want to make you late for your appointment, Dr. Lecter. I’ll be seeing you.”

“Until then, Jack.”

Hannibal gets into his car and starts the engine, waiting for Jack to disappear around the building before easing out of the space and onto the road. The drive to Port Haven is about ten minutes long with traffic, but he still gets to the building a few minutes early. A cheerful redheaded nurse at the front desk recognizes him and sets aside her current task to page Dr. Pearce. She smiles at him as he nears; she must be Trudy.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Lecter. I’ve just let Dr. Pearce know you’ve arrived. He’ll be out in just a minute.”

“Thank you, Miss Jacobson.”

He paces leisurely toward the expansive bookshelf near the couches in the lobby. He sees Jasper’s *General Psychology* and smiles secretively, trying to think of a way to lure Will to it the next time they come together to visit Abigail.

“Dr. Lecter.” He turns at the sound of the voice he had spoken to on the phone the previous week. A stout man with prescription glasses and an unsettling hair piece comes forward and shakes his hand. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. Your report was rather informative. I’m curious to see what you could accomplish with Cora once given more time.”

They walk together down the hall. Hannibal tells him, “She is a very interesting young woman. There are many barriers that still must come down.”

“Yes, of course; such a shame none of us have been able to adequately help her. I was more than happy to accept Dr. Bloom’s referral when she suggested it, and Cora was very enthusiastic about the change as well. I can’t begin to tell you how rare it is for her to show an interest in anyone or anything. We were quite surprised she took a shine to Miss Hobbs, as you can imagine.”

Hannibal does not tell him his theories as to why Cora Armistead had gravitated toward Abigail or vice versa. He had told Alana in order for her to better understand Abigail; this man has no need of knowing, though his intentions seem genuine enough.

“Today is my last session with Cora; it won’t be therapy so much as it will be the two of us making sure this is what she wants. Cora is an adult and capable of making decisions for herself, but she has been coddled and *managed* so long I worry she may agree to the things we ask of her only to garner our approval.”

“Your fears are not unfounded; there was, however, an incident I was informed of that would suggest she does have a rather independent mind of her own.”

“Yes,” Dr. Pearce says on a long exhale. “One of our other patients, Nadine Dufort, instigated violence with Cora, and it did not end well. Neither of them came out of it unscathed.”

“May I ask what happened?”

“Yes, of course.” Pearce opens the door to his office and follows Hannibal in. Cora sits patiently on the other side of the room slowly turning the pages of a heavy book. A brunette in the mandatory hospital scrubs leers over her shoulder like a bird perched over its prey. Hannibal clears his throat, and the nurse looks up before hesitantly leaving Cora’s side. “I would prefer it if she told you herself to encourage communication, but I will if she had rather not. Thank you, Miss Mulloy.”

She nods her head and opens the door, a stern frown permanently etched across her red mouth. Hannibal watches her quietly exit the room, a much younger woman than Trudy Jacobsen but far more seasoned by the sour mood that permeates her being like a foul perfume. She must be Diane.

“Cora, say hello to Dr. Lecter.” Pearce’s tone is not at all patronizing, but it brings a displeased lilt to the corner of Hannibal's mouth that is more like a grimace than it is like anything else. Cora sets the book down and turns to face him. The sickened feeling worsens.

She waves timidly, more a reflection of her shame for being seen in such a way than a reflection of her nature. When he met her for the first time, he saw that she reserved the best parts of herself for people she trusted only, but this is not an extension of that rule.

Hannibal has seen worse as both an emergency room doctor and as a psychiatrist, but he is not prepared for the eye shield covering her left orbit or for the perfect vertical slit in the middle of her bottom lip. He does not react, but he feels himself growing angry for her. He reasons that he does so because it could have been Abigail with these injuries had it not been Cora, but he doesn’t linger. It’s clear she doesn’t want him to focus on her appearance, so he will respect her silent wishes for him not to.

He asks instead, “What are you reading?”

She holds up the book, relieved. It is René Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy.*

Hanging up his coat and unbuttoning his suit jacket, he crosses the short distance of the room to sit across from her on the edge of the chaise lounge. “Quite a circular scholar, isn’t he? The only thing he could be sure of in the end was that he couldn’t be sure of anything but for his own existence.”

Cora smiles, a microexpression he would miss altogether had he been watching any less closely than he is. She signs, *I think; therefore, I am.*

“Very good,” he praises her, lightly so his words will not be mistaken for mockery. Her smile widens just so.

I like to read.

“An admirable use of your time.”

He hears Dr. Pearce approach from behind and settle into a chair a few feet off where he can observe without troubling himself to interact with them. It is for the best. He had wasted seven years of his life and of Cora’s life attempting to understand the void that abbreviates her unconscious mind from his prying. Hannibal would not err in the ways that Pearce had.

He asks a slightly more complex question: “Which of his illustrations do you find the most revealing of the nature of perception?”

She responds immediately, *The wax from the honeycomb.*

“Why the wax?”

She sets the book in her lap to use both hands.

The wax is an extension just like the body is an extension.

With her left hand, she rapidly spells out, *Res extensa.*

“Extended thing,” he translates from the Latin. She nods and continues.

When it passes through the fire, it loses all identifiable properties that we would call it wax upon perceiving them with our senses. It becomes something we fail to recognize as wax, but it does not change at all. It only transitions into another one of its equally natural stages. Our physical bodies, like the wax, are understood intellectually. Wax remains wax even as its characteristics are stripped away; a body remains what or who he is when the traits we know so well are stripped away.

“It appeals to you, the prospect of stripping away the superficial layers of a person and understanding who he is, truly.”

She furrows her eyebrows for half a second, jostling the eye shield covering nearly a quarter of her face. The movement reminds her of its existence momentarily, but she ignores it in favor of answering him.

Doesn’t it appeal to everyone?

“Some might call it a gift to finally get at the heart of someone; you would consider it the primary goal.”

She shakes her head and signs, *Just the only one that counts for anything.*

He allows that to settle in his mind. She’s much brighter than he initially gave her credit for. He catches her looking off to the side at Dr. Pearce where he sits somewhere to the left of Hannibal about six feet off. He catches her eye again, subtly turns his head in the man’s direction, and raises an eyebrow in question. Cora is exceedingly bright, he decides. She shakes her head no, the barely there smile curving one edge of her mouth.

Segueing into sign language is fairly easy, though he is aware of the obvious repercussions it will have with Pearce once they are alone again. Her display is proof enough that she is comfortable speaking with him.

He signs, *You don't trust Dr. Pearce?*

Not if he's only going to watch.

That he can almost hear the frolicsome tease in her words puts a smirk on his face as well. He turns in his seat to face Pearce. The man pens something and after a few moments pass in silence, he looks up, surprised to find Hannibal watching him.

"Would you care to join us, Dr. Pearce? Your furious scribbling is making us both nervous."

"Apologies." He stands and drops into the chair beside Cora. "You interact so easily. To interrupt felt like an intrusion."

"Nonsense; you are still her doctor, after all." Hannibal says it like the root of Cora's problems in this institution isn't his constant forgetfulness of that fact. "We were only philosophizing."

"Yes, of course."

"Cora," Hannibal gently calls her attention. "Would you care to tell me what happened with Nadine Dufort?"

She does not withdraw completely, but she does recede from him. Pearce goes to interject, but Hannibal holds his hand up to stay him. She only needs a moment to gather her words, and he was right in saying that his interruption would be an intrusion.

Nadine spread a rumor about Abigail.

He had theorized, on a subconscious level, that Abigail had been at least peripherally involved. "What did she say?" Cora bites the right side of her lip and looks away. She shakes her head. "Cora."

She called her…

Hannibal can fill it in, but he will wait for Cora to do it. She sighs heavily and releases her lip from between her teeth.

Cannibal, she said cannibal; screamed it all through the garden.

"Do you know why?"

She taps her thumb against her forehead the way she had when she met Hannibal, the word *father.*

"Garrett Jacob Hobbs," Hannibal clarifies. "Have you heard of his crimes?"

He killed girls. She drops her hands into her lap, swallows, and holds them up again. *Girls that looked like her, and he ate their organs.*

"Nadine accused Abigail of having a hand in it." Cora nods. "What did you do?"

She glances at Pearce and then at her hands.

I took Abigail inside and Nadine grabbed me.

"Why single you out when her problem was with Abigail?"

Hannibal already knows the answer, but if he asks a more direct question, he will not get the response out of her that he needs.

Cora signs, without reluctance, *Nadine always meant to single me out.*

"Because you are different."

Cora goes to object but catches herself analyzing Hannibal's words for a double meaning. Her eyes track down to his tie, and she stares for a moment as if she can see the place where Will bit him even though no trace of it remains. She makes a fist with her left hand and makes a knocking gesture: *Yes.*

"Why do you think she picked that day?" She shakes her head. He rephrases, "Did something happen with Abigail?"

He watches her think about it and then savors the moment it dawns on her, though the expression would be much more improved if he could see it manifest across the entirety of her face. She gives away very little in the way of facial clues. Most of her tells lie in her hands.

My mother called.

"Abigail spoke for you."

Usually I ask Nurse Trudy, but Abigail offered, and I felt like I could say more to her than to a staff member.

"Miss Dufort saw your exchange and became jealous."

She's been jealous since Abigail picked me over her.

"Do you think her jealousy is warranted?"

She thinks it is. She started shoving me, so I shoved back. The nurses didn't realize we were fighting until Nadine swung at me the second time. That's when she got my eye.

To Pearce, who has gone back to scribbling emphatically in his notes, Hannibal asks, "Did the blow result in hyphaema of her left eye?"

“Yes,” he replies, clicking his pen. “There were complications; she needed to have surgery.”

“Does it hurt at all?”

Cora smiles mirthlessly and says, *You should see Nadine.*

Hannibal nods his head solemnly. He imagines it does hurt, even with the help of pain medication. Cora opens to a random page in Descartes’ philosophical ramblings and slowly scans the words, turning her head just so to account for the limited vision on her right side.

“Dr. Pearce.” Hannibal turns to find the man studying Cora, pen laid flat on the yellow legal pad. “I think it would be best if Miss Armistead returned to her room for the remainder of the afternoon.” He sees Cora correcting him out of the corner of his eye and acknowledges her inverted hand sign for the word *mirror,* modified to mean her name. “Cora would benefit from rest. I will speak to her again when she is better—properly, as her doctor.”

Rather than reply in words, thankfully, the man stands and retreats to his desk to call the front desk for an escort. Hannibal feels the need to warn him against Mulloy, but he hears him thank Nurse Jacobsen by name.

Cora signs to him, *Did she do it?*

He doesn’t ask her to specify; she is asking him about Abigail.

Hannibal signs back, wary of the other ears in the room: *We do whatever our fathers ask of us*.

Cora shivers, and Hannibal can see that her mind has gone the way of Anson Huxley and his role in their son’s life; perhaps she is thinking about the five months he kept her in the woods, and perhaps she is thinking of her own absent father. She could be anywhere in that distant, enigmatic mind of hers.

Trudy Jacobsen retrieves Cora promptly, she signs goodbye, and they leave together without incident. Hannibal would like to see what she did to Nadine, if she did anything at all or if she had known any kind of violence from her, even if it was in self-defense, would reflect poorly with Pearce and his team of doctors. Hannibal approaches Dr. Pearce’s desk and signs the patient transfer form without exchanging further words on the matter. As little as he has actually done to help Cora Armistead, he does want her helped. He sees that Hannibal will help her, and so there is nothing, in his mind, that begs for prolonged discussion.

He leaves the office and makes for the exit, glancing at a wall clock for the time. He has thirty minutes left over from the consult before his next patient arrives at his practice. He climbs the stairs and knocks on the door to Abigail’s room.

She invites him in happily, though something is bothering her. He places his hand on her shoulder to stop her from pacing. Without being prodded further for an answer, she whispers, “Did you see what Nadine did to her?”

The wrathful note in her voice pleases him. He had rather her experience be one of rage than of pity or horror.

“I saw.” He rubs at her back and can feel the tension there; a week later, and she is still incredibly angry. “Did you see if she fought back?”

“She broke Nadine’s nose.” He suspects she hears what she sounds like, but she makes no effort to hide it. Hannibal knows her most condemning secret. She doesn’t need to keep something so simple from him. With an unveiled awe, Abigail adds, “Cora threw Nadine on the ground. The nurses had to pull her off. I couldn’t believe she did it; Nadine must be at least two heads taller than Cora.”

“Pain can be debilitating; an excellent distraction if one needs to subdue an attacker.”

Abigail considers that and asks, “Are you going to be her doctor?”

“I am.”

“Good.”

“I think so, yes.” Hannibal smiles. “Please sit. Your friend is resting in her room; she will be all right.”

Abigail does sit, though it does nothing, initially, to calm her down. She sets the closed journal in front of her down on the bedside table. Hannibal notices it is a different color than her last one. “She was just defending me.”

“I know,” Hannibal consoles her. He sits down in front of her on the bed. “You mustn’t blame yourself.”

With the slightest amount of venom, she counters, “I blame Nadine.”

“As you should.” Abigail studies him for a moment before looking behind him out the window. “She holds some jealous grudge against your friend, and she seeks to use you to hurt her. You cannot allow her to succeed.”

“I won’t.” She turns a blue ballpoint pen in her hands. “And if she thinks she’ll get close enough to try it a second time, I’ll show her that I won’t.” Hannibal reaches forward to touch her hair. He finds himself proud of her, to the point of brimming over with the feeling.

She pauses and lightly tosses the pen onto her journal. He pulls back, and she locks eyes with him, that calm anger set aside for now but still present deep in the back of her mind.

“Do you think I’m my father’s daughter?”

“I think you are whoever’s daughter that you wish to be.”

“You said you and Will would adopt me.”

“And I meant it, truly.”

She looks down and then at the wall. “I’m going to be stuck here forever.”

“Abigail.” He takes her cheek in his hand and waits for her to return her gaze to him. “I swear to you, Will and I are going to protect you. You will be free of this place someday; the three of us will be free, and we will be together.”

A lone wrinkle finds its way to her brow. “The three of us will be free?”

“In time, Abigail.”

“But what do you mean? What does that mean, we’ll be free? What aren’t you free of now?”

To calm her rising panic, he kneels at her side and holds both her hands in his. The beginning signs of oncoming hysterics wind down and drain out of her petite shoulders. He takes a moment to relish in the unbending confidence he has earned from both Will and Abigail that his touch alone has become such a cleansing relief.

“We cannot always anticipate what the future holds.”

Shakily, she asks, “What do you anticipate for us?”

“I anticipate a period of separation wherein each of us will be tested.”

“What kind of test?”

“A test of trust,” he says, honestly. He continues, “Of fealty.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will, mano dukrelė.”

She looks confused by the words she doesn’t understand but lets it be. Instead, she asks, calmly, “Does Will know what you’re up to?”

“He does. All will be revealed, Abigail. You have my word.”

She isn’t entirely sold on his plan, but she resigns herself to waiting the way he asks her to. Half of what he did tell her was to trust him, so trust him she does, implicitly. He rises to kiss her hair and allows her to hold onto his hands for a few moments longer before pulling away. She stands as he turns to leave.

“We will come to visit you soon.”

She nods as he reaches for the door, and the hollow shine in her eyes gives him pause. His fingers brush the handle and then fall. He turns to face her again, and she vaults forward to close him in a hug.

“You promise we’ll be together?”

“I promise, baby.”

He freezes as soon as the endearment leaves his lips, but Abigail does not fret over the strangeness of it. If anything, the use of the name soothes her. She tightens her hold on him once more before reluctantly letting go. As he descends the stairs and leaves the building, he registers just how much the warmth of her embrace leaves him numb to other stimuli.

If she is in fact a surrogate for his sister, however unintentional, he will do whatever it takes to ensure their family, Will included, can be whole again.

He is not a little boy anymore; his bones will not break so easily this time.

Chapter End Notes

Cambria Katherine's Vineyard Chardonnay 2010
http://www.wine.com/V6/Cambria-Katherines-Vineyard-Chardonnay-2010/wine/116554/detail.aspx

Kim Crawford Sauvignon Blanc 2012
http://www.wine.com/v6/Kim-Crawford-Sauvignon-Blanc-2012/wine/119636/detail.aspx

The luncheon of champions
http://www.pierpointrestaurant.com/menuswinelist.html

Mano dukrelė > my daughter (diminutive)

I Can't See Your Face In My Mind

Chapter Summary

Checking in with Abigail.

Chapter Notes

Don't you cry/Baby, please don't cry/I won't need your picture/Until we say goodbye/I can't seem to find the right lie

"How do you feel when you think about those days, Lorelei?"

Abigail watches, trying to hide how boring this session has been so far, as Lorelei rolls her eyes, disguising the action by looking up at the ceiling as if for an answer. She drops her shoulders and shakes her head, clearly exasperated at the tedium of having to cover this topic again.

"Like I'll shoot that sorry bastard if I ever see him again."

A few girls laugh around the circle; Abigail purses her lips together to keep from joining in. Nina, their group therapist, sighs heavily and sets her pen down on her notepad in her lap.

"I mean, I can be real with you, or I can give you the *correct* answer." Lorelei flips her short hair out dramatically, donning an artificial smile. She says, in a much airier voice, "I've thought about it for a long time, and I've come to realize that Sean is just a silly old chapter in the book of my life, and I've completely forgiven him for cheating on me with my best friend and running off with my dog while I was visiting my dying mother in the hospital at Thanksgiving."

Abigail bites her lip at the angry tone she's taken on by the end of her slight tirade against Sean. She's heard about the guy three times now, and apparently, three times is too many times to ask Lorelei to talk about him.

"There is no right or wrong answer, Lorelei. Just be honest with the group."

Lorelei looks at the nine other girls in the circle. Her eyes lock with Abigail's for about two seconds before she scans the four remaining girls' faces. She looks again at Nina and calmly says, "If I ever see him again, I will shoot him with a paintball gun and then jump on his head while wearing steel cleats."

“What do you think about Lorelei’s feelings of resentment toward Sean?” Nina appeals to the group, and Lorelei sags back into her chair. She is a patient and levelheaded person outside of group, but inside this room, she is agitated and unfocused, and she constantly says the wrong thing. Routine responses be damned, there is always a right and a wrong answer. She clarifies when no one moves to answer: “Do you think it’s healthy for her to hold a grudge?”

“Leading the witness,” a girl on Abigail’s right mumbles, almost incoherently.

“What was that, Jordan?”

She shakes her head, and her dark red bangs fall into her face to hide her eyes.

“She said you’re leading the witness,” Nadine enunciates. The sound of her voice draws Abigail’s eyes to her face and then specifically to the scab high up on the bridge of her nose. It’s unfortunate they still have to do therapy together, but no one seems to understand how much of Nadine’s trouble with Cora had to with Abigail. They stare each other down for a moment, and when Abigail doesn’t back down from the challenge, something like affection brightens in Nadine’s eyes. Abigail grits her teeth; it’s the last thing she wants Nadine to feel for her after what she did to Cora.

Patiently, Nina replies, “It’s the only way to engage the rest of you in our discussion if you don’t participate.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Abigail says firmly when Nina’s eyes land on her. “Lorelei doesn’t want to talk about it either; we should respect that.”

“We don’t have to talk about it.” Nina raises her hands, though Abigail’s tone wasn’t hostile.

Lorelei nods faintly at Abigail, a silent gesture of gratitude. She nods back but doesn’t smile lest Nina think she’s enjoying herself because she isn’t at all. Being around Cora more often has made her more sensitive to the nonverbal ways in which people communicate opinions and emotions.

Nina clears her throat and tries again, offering Lorelei a better question: “Why do you think it affected you so much, that he did those things to you?” Lorelei doesn’t react to the question, but she does think about it. It’s safer to ask more narrow questions without being too specific. “Was it a controlled response, or were you acting on feeling?”

“I thought it was controlled,” Lorelei answers after a pensive moment of contemplation. She frowns and looks down at her hands. “At first I thought, hey, he deserves to have everything taken from him, so I’ll do that, but then everything…I guess things got out of hand.”

Jordan mumbles, “You set his apartment building on fire.”

Lorelei doesn’t react to that either.

She mumbles back, tonelessly, “I said things got out of hand.”

The woman to Abigail’s left, Valerie, takes a stuttering breath in. Her voice shakes nervously when she speaks. She says, “Isn’t that what fire does; it does what it wants no matter what we

do to contain it."

Nadine rolls her eyes. "Profound."

"Leave her alone," Abigail snaps.

Playfully but with a hard edge, Nadine coos, "Or what, cannibaby, you'll chop me up and cook me in a stew?"

"That's adorable. Did you rehearse it in front of the mirror this morning before breakfast?"

"Whoa, ladies." Nina spares them each a confused glance. "Do we have a problem?"

Abigail seethes beneath the mask of a cool exterior the likes of which she learned from Will seeing him interact with Freddie Lounds. Nadine laughs and says, "Not at all; right, Abby?"

She lowers her eyes and studies the faint yellow stains left behind on Nadine's skin from Cora's small hands. It reminds her of the fresh bruising she saw painted around Will's throat the day he visited with Hannibal, the day Dr. Bloom prepared a domestic picnic for them in the garden. She hadn't given much thought to it; just figured at the time that he'd been attacked in the field. He never told her exactly what happened, and guessing at what it could have been frightens her.

Nina's voice breaks through the fog of her distraction. "Abigail?"

"There's no problem," she says, meaning it because there is no problem. As long as Nadine stays away from Cora, the way the staff had been making sure she would, there wouldn't be any problems.

Not quite satisfied but deciding not to push it further, Nina returns her focus to Lorelei, who stiffens immediately when her gaze falls upon her again. Abigail listens to the rest, but she doesn't. They talked about her problems last week while Nadine had, thankfully, been out to recover from the minor rhinoplasty she needed after her fight with Cora. They won't need to talk about her problems again for another few weeks, and hopefully, by then, their group assignments will have changed.

Lorelei talks a little bit more about her downward spiral after Sean wrecked her life; she doesn't *call it* a downward spiral, but it's pretty apparent that that's what happened. Arson is a pretty big deal, especially when it's not the worst part of the ride. Lorelei's problem was always her temper, but beyond her short fuse, she was more than a little unhinged. Abigail never asked her about it; she doesn't want to unless Lorelei opens up about it on her own.

This isn't opening up; it's forced and censored, and a lot of the comments the other girls give are contrived or unhelpful. Abigail hates group therapy. At least when she talks to Dr. Bloom, it feels like they're making substantial progress.

"Other people could have been hurt when you started that fire," she hears Nina say.

"I wasn't thinking about other people; I just wanted to hurt him."

Abigail's mind goes to her last conversation with Hannibal when he came to meet with Cora and the dean. He scared her then, talking about tests and freedom; he had mentioned separation and fealty, and she wished he would just tell her what he meant by it all. She hadn't seen him since then, though he had called on Sunday, she suspects, to relieve some of the tension he left her with when they parted ways.

She'd lived with an awful dread since that day. Cora's bulky eye shield hadn't settled her nerves at all. She finally took it off yesterday, but the jaundice-colored skin left in its place proved to be even worse of an eye sore, damn the pun.

Nina dismisses them after a few more words Abigail ignores, and the ten shuffling patients in the circle stand. Abigail folds her chair and sets it against the wall. Lorelei sets hers on top of Abigail's and walks beside her on their way out. Nadine glances pointedly at Abigail, considers Lorelei's presence next to her, and promptly leaves the room.

Lorelei jokes, "You think she might be in love with you?"

Abigail muffles the laugh that bubbles up out of her throat with the back of one hand. She says, "If only pulling on my pigtails at recess was still the socially acceptable way for her to show her affection for me."

"There's a story there, though, I bet." Lorelei doesn't pry further. She's seen Abigail sit with Cora, and she can guess at how Abigail feels regarding her and Nadine's altercation nearly two weeks ago now. They grab lunch in the cafeteria, a salad for Abigail and a neatly wrapped chicken sandwich for Lorelei. Abigail waits for Lorelei to grab a handful of barbecue sauce packets from the allotted receptacle by the napkins and quickly scans the room for Cora.

"Oh, I meant to ask you before group. That guy who visits you sometimes; his name is Will Graham, right?"

Abigail glances at Lorelei, not finding Cora anywhere in the large room. "Yeah, how did you know?"

"There was this article about a dead girl I read online when my brother checked me out yesterday afternoon. Well, no, she wasn't actually dead, but I guess she thought she was." She frowns and waves her hand. "Couture something, I don't know, but I saw a picture of him on the website."

"What did the article say?"

"It was some tabloid thing; not sure how accurate it is or if it's accurate at all." Abigail sits down and Lorelei takes the seat opposite. She leans over her tray, dropping her voice so no one sitting at a different table will be able to hear. "Apparently she broke into his house and tried to kill him."

"What?" Abigail hates that her voice trembles on the question.

“He’s not quoted anywhere in the article, so…” Lorelei weighs her hands like scales. “Sleazy journalism; I thought you might know more about it since Will Graham is kind of your support group away from your support group.” She perks up. “Oh, here comes Cora.”

Abigail turns to look over her shoulder and sees Cora glance uncertainly at Lorelei before turning a less apprehensive eye on her. She gestures with her hand for Cora to come sit with them. After considering it for a few seconds, Cora nods and heads to the bar to collect a tray of food for herself. Lorelei is smiling to herself when Abigail turns back around to face her.

“I’ll wait ‘til she gets back with her food, just to make sure Nadine doesn’t try to mess with you.”

“You don’t have to go. She might like to meet you.”

“Cora has no interest in meeting me; I know that from experience,” Lorelei muses with a strange hint of fondness to her words. She looks up as Cora approaches and promptly stands. “I’m going to go see if I can get Valerie to tell me again about her spelunking days.” She smiles kindly at Cora and then leaves quietly with her tray.

Cora stares after her retreating back with a mildly confused expression on her face. She turns it on Abigail, a question.

“She didn’t want to make you uncomfortable. I asked her to stay, but you two have a history?”

Her battered friend sighs softly through her nose and takes the freed seat across from her. She looks off to the side, searching silently for the best way to relate her side of the story to Abigail in signed words she will understand. Her knowledge of the language is still pretty basic, though they get by.

Deciding, Cora nods her head and looks up at Abigail. She presses her first finger against her chin and pulls it across until the finger leaves her face and curls toward her hand.

“Oh, um…” She saw that one when Cora was telling her about what therapy with Dr. Pearce was like. “That’s not the word for tedious, is it?”

Cora spells with her left hand, *D-U-L-L.*

“She tried to set her ex-boyfriend on fire. You think she’s dull?”

Cora bites her lip, a knit settling in between her eyebrows. They’re fair like Hannibal’s. She signs, *N-O-R-M-A-L.*

Abigail considers the implications of the word, and Cora starts in on the tuna noodle casserole that served as the main entrée for today’s lunch menu. She takes a few bites of her salad and inconspicuously observes Cora as she eats with her head bowed almost enough so that her chin touches her chest. Abigail found out pretty early on in their ritual of sharing meals together that she does it to hide the sight of her tongue from Abigail when she opens her mouth.

“You’re not picky about what you eat, are you?”

Cora looks up from her food, bewildered. She taps her thumb against her chin, *mother*, and then spells out the word, *chef*.

“Really?”

She nods and ducks her head to take another bite, freeing her hands. Chewing she adds, *Restaurant.*

“One she worked at?” Cora’s eyes flick up at the ceiling, indicating a half truth. “She owned one?”

Cora knocks with her left hand and takes another bite of the fishy casserole. Abigail examines it a bit more closely. It certainly isn’t Hannibal’s cooking, but she hadn’t really given it a chance since the road kill and weeds stew that was the beef and broccoli stir-fry. She spells out the name, *Joseph*, and points to the cook managing the pots of steaming food behind the buffet-style bar. Abigail looks back at Cora. She touches her chin and lays the back of that hand in the palm of her right, nodding as she does it.

“He’s good?”

Cora hums and takes a sip from the clear container of grape juice beside her tray. Abigail wishes Cora would come to lunch with writing materials, but since Nadine had gone through their first and only written correspondence, Cora hadn’t attempted it a second time. She never told Cora about that incident, so she isn’t sure how she intuited that they would better off not leaving a paper trail for her to use against them again.

She almost doesn’t voice the question, which leads her to work it out further in her head before speaking. Out of nowhere, she says, “Oscar told you.” Cora keeps her eyes trained resolutely on her food and takes another bite. Quietly, she adds, “He told you what she wrote in my journal.”

Her eyes prick at the edges, inexplicably angry. Cora sighs softly and signs, *Georgina.*

Before Abigail can ask what she means, Cora adds with drawn out pauses in between, *you placed moon.*

She wrinkles her eyebrows at that and then realizing what she means, says it out loud, “He thinks I hung the moon?”

Cora nudges her cheek with her thumb and chops her arm through the air until it lands on her resting forearm: *daughter.*

“But why did he tell you?”

She shakes her head and spells out, *Bloom.*

“Oh, my God.”

She hadn't told Dr. Bloom that it happened; she never asked. She knew all along and didn't bring it up once during their sessions. Cora taps her gently on the arm, and she takes her head out of her hands without bothering to sit up straighter.

You're okay.

Brokenly, she says, "I don't feel okay."

Cora hums, a slight frown on her mouth. She says, *I know.*

"What do you mean?"

Your father, I know.

Abigail stares blankly, blood spiking to ice in her veins.

Eat, Abs.

Cora tilts her head, confused at the way Abigail's face pales at the nickname. Her dad used to call her Abs.

"It's nothing." She waves her hand dismissively and forces herself to eat the salad even though it tastes like dirt on her tongue no matter how much ranch she pours over it. Cora only calls her *Abs* because it's less work to spell out than her full name. There's no reason to get on her about it. There's no reason her heart should be pounding in her chest or her hands shaking as pronouncedly as they are. Cora watches her, obviously concerned, though she doesn't say anything more.

Abigail numbly picks at her salad and pictures Cora's confession about Anson that first day they really spoke to each other in the library. Hannibal's words the week before left her feeling like her days here were numbered, which was both a welcome relief and a very real, nagging fear at the back of her mind. With a great deal of guilt that only faintly reaches her voice, she asks, "How did you lose your tongue, Cora?"

She stops eating and swallows twice before finding Abigail's eyes.

Why?

"You know the worst thing about me, and I don't know anything about you that your doctors haven't read in police reports."

Cora looks away, a blush creeping up the side of her neck.

I can't say.

Abigail can't hide her disappointment at the words; it's more of an ache than it is anything else. Cora sees the look on her face and amends her statement.

No, I can't sign it.

“Why not?”

Her jaw clenches.

It’s complicated.

“What’s complicated about it?”

Not here, please.

Abigail looks around the bustling cafeteria and nods reluctantly. She takes another bite of her salad and asks softly, “But you will tell me?”

Cora worries her lip with her teeth and nods.

I owe you an explanation.

She swallows nervously and returns to her casserole. Abigail follows her lead and finishes the food on her tray. It doesn’t taste like anything.

“I’m going to make a phone call,” Abigail mumbles when they leave the cafeteria. She isn’t ready for the conversation they’re about to have, and she needs to talk to Will. Cora nods and points at the door to the garden. It’s a bit cold out today; there’s snow on the ground from last night. “Greenhouse?” Cora nods and promptly leaves her to her business.

Abigail falls wearily into a seat by the phone on the writing desk, immediately dialing Will’s cell. He answers on the fifth ring as she’s looking over her shoulder. He sounds tired.

“Hello?”

“I heard someone broke into your house last night. Is it true?”

“Hello, Abigail.” He sighs and shuffles on the other line. “How did you find out about that?”

“Another patient told me. I think Freddie Lounds posted something about it on her blog.”

He groans and says, “And I’m guessing there were no sources listed.”

“Probably not. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” He pauses. “She wasn’t going to hurt me.”

“Did she really think she was dead?”

“It’s called Cotard’s Syndrome. It’s a mental disorder; really rare.”

“Was Hannibal there when she broke in?”

“Why do you ask?”

“He’s been staying with you in Wolf Trap for the past few weeks. He told me last time we talked on the phone.” She adds before he can respond, “And he had dog hair on him the last couple times he visited.” Will snorts but doesn’t say anything. “You’re really okay?”

“Yes, Abigail, we’re both okay; nobody got hurt, and Georgia’s been hospitalized.” She notes the distant sadness in his voice when he says the woman’s name, but she doesn’t remark on it. The most important piece of information is that he’s okay; he and Hannibal both are okay.

They sit in silence for a while and Abigail rests her forehead in her hand. The last few weeks have been stressful, and she doesn’t foresee things getting much better.

In response to her silence, he says, “Hannibal told you something the last time he was over there.”

“Did he tell you?”

“No, you just—and he…Ah, it’s hard to explain.”

“You can do that over the phone?”

She can almost hear him blushing; the mental image brings a tiny smile to her face, vastly improving her mood.

“It’s your speech patterns; when you’re stressed out, they change in a really distinctive way. I just extrapolated from Hannibal’s usual riddle-speak and your tone of voice.” Almost defensively, he concludes, “It’s nothing special.”

“You really can assume any point of view, can’t you?”

A beat of silence trickles between them. “Did Hannibal tell you that?”

“He tells me a lot of things,” she says hesitantly.

“What did he tell you the last time he went to see you?”

“Something kind of scary about time running out,” she replies, being purposely vague in case anyone should walk by and hear. “He said you knew what his game was, but he wouldn’t tell me anything else except that our trust in each other would be tested. What aren’t you free of?”

Her desperation distresses him, clearly. He has to try twice to make his words come out right.

“We shouldn’t have this conversation over the phone.”

She fights the sharp stab of turmoil that pierces a deep place in her chest. She doesn’t argue, agonized as she is to be told to wait twice in the span of one hour. Battling with her impatience and her fear, she asks in an impressively firm voice, “Then when?”

He sighs again, and she catalogues the slight edge to it; not a tired sound at all but one of pain.

“A few days, maybe,” he answers after a long pause.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Will?”

“I’m just getting over a bug.” She pictures him waving his hand for her to forget it; she doesn’t, but she doesn’t mention it either. “We’ll pick you up for dinner sometime next week; we’ll explain, I promise.”

“What part?”

He sucks in a sharp breath, and she bites her tongue so she won’t ask him again if he’s okay.

“That stuff Hannibal said to you and why he said it. We’ll take care of you, Abigail; don’t ever worry about that.”

She believes him, completely and unflinchingly. It frightens her, but she believes him. She believes *in* him and in Hannibal, too.

In a small voice, she says, “Okay.”

Conversationally, though the words are hollow, Will asks, “Have you eaten lunch?”

“I had a salad.”

“You and Cora?”

“Yeah.” She looks toward the door to the garden and runs a nervous hand through her hair. “Has Hannibal told you about her?”

“He’s said a bit; I found the rest online. Anson Huxley, her child with him.”

“What do you think?”

“I’ve tried not to, honestly.”

“Why not?”

He chuckles without humor. “Because…if I really saw her, maybe I wouldn’t want you hanging around her.” He reconsiders and says, “Or maybe I would. It’s not my call either way.”

“What if it could help her, to be seen like that?”

“The point is, no one *wants* to be seen the way I can see them.”

“Hannibal does.” She listens devoutly to his silence that screams the way silence tends to at the best and worst of times. “I do.”

“You didn’t before you knew what I would do with it.”

“What’s happened to Cora is done,” she says without heat. “There’s nothing we can do about it anyway.”

“Why don’t you ask her to tell you then?”

“I did,” she sighs. “She said she would as soon as I get off the phone with you, but I’m…”

“Terrified?”

“In my bones, everywhere; the way horses get when there’s a storm coming and the only thing they can do once they feel it is run.”

“Will you run?”

“There isn’t any time left for that, is there?”

She can hear how deeply he’d rather not say it, but he does: “No.”

“Then I can’t.” She blinks back the tears welling up almost painfully in her eyes. “She deserves to tell at least one person the truth.”

Morosely, he muses, “I guess everyone deserves that.”

She swallows hard around the contagious toxin of melancholy spreading through bottom of her throat. Pretty abruptly, she says, “I’m going to go.”

“When she tells you, just remember that she’s…the Cora Armistead you know right now isn’t any different than the one you’ll think she is afterward. You’ll try to make yourself believe that something about her has changed because it would be easier to forget her that way, but whoever she reveals herself to be, she’ll always have been that person, no matter how much you wish she wasn’t.”

“Will?”

Softly, he says, “You’re asking us to tell you the truth, too.”

A chill rushes down her spine.

“But it won’t change who you are to me,” she paraphrases his words, voice strangled around her constricting airway.

Calmly, he reassures her, “I promise, Abigail.”

“Okay.”

“We’ll talk in a few days.”

“Bye, Will.”

“Bye, baby.”

Her mouth drops open at the pet name Hannibal used just last week when they were saying their goodbyes. The line goes dead, and she hangs up the phone, dazed. She sits for a few minutes, still and quiet and shaking where no one would see.

A hand falls on her shoulder, and she expects to see Cora but gets Trudy's worried face peering down at her instead. Abigail studies her coppery red hair and doesn't flinch when Trudy wipes at her cheek with a smooth, starched handkerchief. She takes it, unthinkingly, and presses the balled up cloth to each eye, leaving tears smeared across her face and partly down her nose.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She shakes her head no and glances at the door to the garden again.

"You won't be going outside like that, will you?" Trudy gestures at Abigail's thin long-sleeved top. Abigail stares blankly and mumbles something about getting her coat from upstairs. "You let me take care of that. I'll be back in two shakes."

Abigail watches complacently as Trudy goes bustling up the stairs. She barely even hears Nadine's voice floating up over the roaring in her ears. She certainly doesn't see her through the clear, unfocused wall of tears sprung anew.

"Ever get tired of dishing out the crocodile tears when you want people to do your bidding?"

Acidly, Abigail retorts, "You would know, as often as you force that fake smile when you want someone to think you don't care about how people react to you."

Nadine doesn't say anything to that, and it's probably because Trudy's already coming back down the stairs, but Abigail likes to think it's because she's wounded her with her words. Nadine hates having the truth used against her, accustomed as she is to lying at every opportunity.

"Here you are, dear."

Abigail stands, blinking through her disorientation and shrugging on her jacket when Trudy drapes it across her shoulders.

"Thank you, Miss Jacobsen."

"Oh, you know you can call me Trudy."

"I'm sorry I used to think you weren't a good nurse."

Something in Trudy's face falls and then composes again; a professional aloofness crossed with sentiment. She pats Abigail on the shoulder. Delicately, she says, "That's all right, Miss Hobbs." She smiles matronly. "We got all that business sorted and behind us, didn't we?"

"Yeah." Abigail tries to smile, and Trudy curtly nods. "You are a good nurse, though; I want you to know that I believe it now even though I didn't before."

“Are you all right, Miss Hobbs? Nadine hasn’t been foul to you, has she? I’ll give her a piece of my mind.”

“No, Nadine is…she’s Nadine.” She shrugs tiredly. “Don’t worry about me; just look after Cora, please?”

“Of course.” Trudy frowns deeply. “Abigail, what is going on with you?”

“Nothing, nothing; I just need some air.” She steps around her with some difficulty. “Group took a lot out of me this morning.” That seems to ease some of the concern off Trudy’s face. It’ll be better for her to think that’s why she’s so nervous. “I’m going up to the greenhouse.”

With no small amount of reluctance, Trudy says, “Off you go then.”

Abigail goes. She crosses the garden, traversing the muddy slush left behind on the brick path that winds beneath the gnarled, frostbitten trees overhead. The apples that once grew have waned and vanished with the winter, with Persephone’s descent into the Underworld and Demeter’s mourning over the fact.

She walks into the warmed building and climbs the two sets of stairs, huffing slightly with her habit of holding her breath whenever she takes the stairs. Cora and two other patients are sitting in the room, watched over by Diane, of all people, and the tall nurse, Evander. Diane ignores her completely, but Evander smiles. She returns it, fond of him for the kindness he consistently expresses toward Cora.

Cora sits at the table in the corner of the room where she first tried to speak to Abigail. Her back is to the door, so she doesn’t alert to Abigail’s presence until she pulls the adjacent chair out and quietly sits beside her. She signs Will’s name curiously.

Not quite whispering but almost, Abigail says, “He’s okay.”

Cora nods and actually looks relieved. She takes a deep breath and slips a neatly folded, doubled up note in front of Abigail on the table. She covers it with her hand and stares at it for a long moment before zipping it in a secure pocket on the inside of her jacket. She wonders if this paper would dissolve in water if she flushed it. After she’s read it, no one can see it. It goes without saying; whatever it says, it is between them and for no one else.

Abigail takes a clean sheet of paper from Cora’s small stack and sketches a sloppy but pretty accurate rendering of a three dimensional geodesic dome with a bright red crayon. Her mother taught her how to draw them one day during spring break before they moved to Minnesota when she was just a girl.

It’s strange thinking about her like some ancient specter never to be seen or spoken to again. It’s even worse thinking about her dad that way, mostly because it’s something of a relief that he won’t be able to haunt her anymore. He had left her fully equipped to weather hell, high water, and anything else in between. He had left her to hate him but to love him and mourn him also. There was no way she couldn’t love him; there’s no way. She can’t say it out loud, but it’s because Will is right. He did horrible things, but he was her dad; he was the man who raised her and coached her through roller skates, riding a bike, and her very first crush.

What he did, who he turned out to be, it didn't change who he always was. It never could.

She glances at Cora and at her blue and purple doodles of palm trees on some beach or other. A smile takes over the quivering line of her mouth, and she can't help the onslaught of emotion that forces a soundless breath out of her lungs in the form of an unhappy laugh. Cora looks up at her, a sad smile of her own brewing on her pretty, tired face.

I'm sorry.

Abigail presses her fingers to her eyes and catches most of the tears before they can fall. She dries her hands on the handkerchief Trudy let her keep and shades in the red intersecting lines of the intricate polygon with the blue.

"Don't ever be sorry for that."

Cora studies her, not understanding. Her lips part slightly, and she asks, *For what?*

Abigail whispers, "For keeping secrets." Cora's eyes widen just so, emphasizing the soft green of her eyes. "We need them sometimes; it can be the only way you have to survive."

She doesn't anticipate the clear shine gloss over Cora's eyes. She doesn't cry, but she does avert her eyes.

It's not your fault.

"It's not yours either."

Cora glances at Abigail's jacket where the note resides.

You don't know that.

"I do," Abigail breathes. She feels as if she's drowning, but she can't help but say what's on her heart; it's too important. "Whatever you did…" Her chest tightens and her lungs pinch at the oxygen when she tries to breathe. Cora is the only one who can hear her, but her words aren't for her alone. She ignores the sound of a tear splashing onto her drawing that vaguely resembles a human heart. "Whatever it was that followed you here, you won't lose me over it."

Cora's eyes are rimmed in a bright fleshy pink, but no tears fall. Her mouth is opened in an expression of speechless shock. Abigail keeps her eyes high up on Cora's face, not allowing herself to be tempted into stealing a glance at anything lower than her nose.

Recovering, she drops her eyes and signs, *Read the note.*

"Now?"

Cora nods slowly and stands as Abigail pulls it out of her pocket. She gathers up the crayons and the papers and Abigail's drawing, too, when she nods to let her know that she can take it.

Cora's gone before Abigail can do anything to stop her short of making a scene. Evander busies himself putting away the plastic container the crayons are kept in, and Diane has taken to hovering over one of the other patients sitting alone in the room. She'll probably stay away from Abigail what with Evander so close by. Abigail slips into a different chair so her back is to the wall and so she'll see if anyone approaches her to try reading over her shoulder and tentatively starts in on the blocky, pale blue print.

Abigail,
You asked why it's complicated, and it's because I loved Noah's father an insensible amount. I still love Anson, if I'm being honest. I was never afraid of him, not even when I should have been. When it became clear to both of us that what we had could never sustain itself, he knew I would never be free of him. He knew people would always see him when they looked at me or at our son.

She flips the page over and sets it on top of the second sheet, hands shaking.

It's why he killed himself when they took him away and why I asked him to do what he did to me. I asked him to, Abigail. I would have given anything to have gone with Anson and stayed with him forever. I still would give almost anything; anything but Noah. With both of us silenced, Anson with death and me with this place, he has a chance to be free of us, though we can never be free of each other.

Abigail folds the first note and reads the final two paragraphs written on one side of the second sheet of paper.

That probably doesn't make sense to you, how we hurt each other and how we were so mad together. I can't imagine ever being that way with another person, and I don't think I ever will. Anson was such a precious experience, despite what you may have heard about him. He never touched me if I didn't want him to, and he never laid a harmful hand on me, especially not after we conceived. Please don't believe that trash. Ill-fated or not, Anson loved me, and I loved him.

That's all. That's the truth. I'm afraid of what you'll think of me now, as you mean so much to me, but I lied to you before, and I'm sorry about it. I shouldn't have. I only wanted you to stay a while. You're so fascinating amongst all the noise other people bring with them.

Her name is signed on the very bottom of the page, just her first name.

Abigail unfolds the first note, tucks it back into place, and folds them again before tucking them into her jacket pocket. She leaves the room, walks blankly down the stairs, and wanders out into the snow. The sky is brilliant and white. A dark, large bird perches noisily on a telephone wire, watching over everything. Abigail stares up at it, thinking of ravens and scarlet ibises, of the endless black at the back of a disconnected pupil and of the red spray of blood on her hands and on Will's hands.

She walks back into the main building when she loses feeling in her cheeks and nose, ignoring Trudy's polite remarks as she stomps the snow off her boots and makes her way up the stairs to the room that never was hers and won't be for much longer. She can feel the

fragility of this final stretching lapse of time between now and the future Hannibal vaguely hinted at.

Abigail shrugs out of her jacket and removes the note as she steps out of her boots and carefully avoids getting the slush on her socks. She drops down onto the firm mattress and thumbs at the clean, unassuming square of white paper.

She unfolds it and reads through it once more carefully, memorizing the turns of phrase and the elegant manner of speaking Cora assumed when she can use all the words she would ordinarily. Abigail smiles in spite of herself at the line, *Ill-fated or not, Anson loved me, and I loved him.*

It's such a *Cora* thing to say. She can imagine the slight sharpened edge of an attitude that would have crept into her voice; defensive, proud Cora hiding behind the sullen, damaged little girl frozen at eighteen when Anson took her away and so radically changed their lives and their destinies; when they brought new life into the equation and became something more and less than their love for each other.

Abigail smiles and tears the note into neat shreds and then into bits and then into unrecognizable scraps of confetti. She scrunches up the pieces in a mixed pile and tosses half of them into the trash beside her bed. The other half she tucks back into her jacket pocket to dispose of when the trash gets taken out.

Task completed, she lies back on the bed and stares up at the ceiling illuminated only by the white light from outside the closed and locked window. The sheer curtains lining the clean window pane tint the light a pale blue on the three walls but leave a portion of the ceiling a spotless white. Abigail reaches for her journal, a nice, sleek hardcover of the same brand as her previous journal but a deep indigo instead of black this time.

She opens to an early page in the journal and rolls over onto her stomach to write.

Trapped in promises
Bound by secrets of the past
Love conquers it all

She studies the last line and scratches it out to replace it with:

Our dreams conquer us

Abigail closes the journal and folds her arms over it, resting her forehead on top of them and slipping into a restless sleep. She dreams in varying shades of white and void, finding herself lost somewhere in all that gray.

My Eyes Have Seen You

Chapter Summary

> The last of Will's time off before some monkey wrenches get thrown into the mix. (Bottom!Hannibal featuring in this chapter)

Chapter Notes

> *My eyes have seen you free from disguise/Gazing on a city under television skies/My eyes have seen you, eyes have seen you/Let them photograph your soul/Memorize your alleys on an endless roll*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will moves the cooked red sausage from the first pan to the next and breaks it up among the pieces of bacon fat. The combined meats sizzle over the fire as Will cracks an egg over the mixture. He breaks the yolk and stirs, the filmy, yellow layer reminiscent of the spinach frittata he'd prepared the first time he endeavored to make breakfast for Hannibal in his kitchen. He shivers at the memory of how he was interrupted just before he could finish and one by one, cracks four more eggs into the pan. Adding some salt and garnishing the plate he has set beside the stovetop with some cilantro he scavenged from the fridge, Will lowers the flame.

The neck of the Riesling Spatlese sweats under his fingers when he tests the bottles temperature. Hannibal said the Heinz Eifel, the name Will had chanted under his breath the whole way down the stairs and into the basement, would complement the spicy sausage composed of Cary Villeneuve's brain and intestines; come to find out, sausage actually can be made, in part, from brains. Traditionally those of a pig are used, but well.

Hannibal had called the dish gelbwurst when he brought home all the organs in their neat, rinsed down plastic bags and ground a small portion of the brain in with the rest of the offal to make this sausage. He had even seasoned the meat when Will asked with oregano, chili powder, garlic, and about five or six other interesting spices and herbs, all of which Will can pick apart the individual smells of if he pays close attention. The gritty, barely detectable cumin ghosts beneath the faintly acrid vinegar and accents the sharp bite of pepper. A crisp hint of peppers permeates the entirety of it, amplified by the warm, placid smell of cooked eggs at war with the slightly sweet but harsh cloves and muggy coriander.

The wine has chilled enough to serve; a good thing since the chorizo will taste best if eaten soon after it's removed from the fire. He pours two glasses and sets the bottle back in the ice

bucket that he has come to know so well. Will examines his work one last time as he neatly shovels an ample portion onto the plate, cautious of spilling over the plate or on the cilantro. He does neither and proudly sets the pan back onto the stove before switching off the fire. He will come back down if they require more.

For now, his mission is to carry the small wooden bed tray with the food, the silverware—he doubles back for that component at the bottom of the stairs when he sees that he's omitted it—and the glasses of wine with a napkin each folded into a square beneath them. He climbs the steps slowly and carefully, not because he needs to watch his balance but because he desperately doesn't want to trip or drop the food.

He sneaks in through the open door to find Hannibal right where he left him nearly half an hour ago on the left side of the bed with a sketchbook in between his legs. Will just stares at him from the doorway, watching as he engineers fine, curved lines with a sharply pointed graphite pencil on the white page occupied with faint, long strokes of indistinguishable black. He doesn't get to watch Hannibal draw very often, so he treasures every opportunity he is afforded as if each occurrence were a bicentennial comet.

He carries on like he isn't even aware of Will's attentive gaze on him, dressed only in a loose pair of sleep pants that he'd pulled on about forty minutes ago upon waking to the very handsy bedmate that had become the norm for Will since he'd recovered from the last of immunotherapy and the lengthy cocktail of other things he'd been taking for the encephalitis. Since rolling out of bed this morning, rejuvenated and buoyant with a lack of nausea or any kind of discomfort in general, Will had few other things on his mind but breakfast and getting Hannibal naked again. He only had on the pants now anyway; it wouldn't be difficult.

"Why is it you can never sit this still when you are the subject of my drawings?" Hannibal looks up at Will expectantly, torso and arms quite naked and hair in an intoxicatingly alluring state of nonchalant disarray. Will grins and pushes off the doorframe to round the bed and set the tray at Hannibal's right hand beside his calf. He crawls onto the bed near Hannibal's hip, carefully so he won't knock over the wine or jostle Hannibal in the middle of a particularly smooth brush of his pencil against the paper.

"You're better at being watched than I am." He leaves a quick kiss on Hannibal's cheekbone. "I never know you're drawing me until you're halfway through my nose." He nips at Hannibal's earlobe and mouths at his temple. "It's not like you need me to model for you."

"It's the principle of the thing," Hannibal says. He presses a shiny metal scalpel flat against the very tip of the kohl black point and shaves off a clean strip crumbled black and wood. The fragilely curled shavings tumble into a quaint little porcelain saucer. The powdered slate contrasts against the white ceramic dish like black feathers dusting over a white, wintry pelt. Hannibal brushes his thumb along the edge of the steel blade to rid it of the fine particles that remain. The black smudges on his skin like soot and rubs away easily.

Catching himself wandering, Will asks dreamily, "What principle?"

"Portraiture can be a clinical affair, removed from intimacy." Hannibal sets the scalpel to his right on the tray and takes an appraising bite of the egg fused together with the spicy sausage. Will gauges his reaction and pleased with what he sees, touches the grooves in the handle of

the tiny knife; it's well within his reach, the tray resting just a few inches out from his knee. "When I draw you, I aim to capture much more than your likeness."

"What else is there?" Will kisses Hannibal's shoulder and then further up over the trapezius muscle. He noses at the nape of Hannibal's neck where the soft tips of his hair tickle his cheeks. He turns his head to accept the fork when Hannibal presents it to him, cradling his free hand beneath it.

"Your essence," Hannibal murmurs. He kisses Will as he's chewing and turns back to his sketch before Will can contribute beyond leaning into it. He huffs a quiet sigh and takes another bite of the chorizo before tasting the Riesling. There's the sweet, fresh taste of fruit in the wine, something like peaches or nectarines. He sniffs at it and swishes the pale liquid around in the glass to get a better whiff of the aroma. It has dryness to it not unlike persimmons the precarious moment before the juice takes on a dragging, tacky quality.

He half expects the wine to turn to blood or sludge in the glass much like his spinal fluid had once in a dream. It holds its clear, pale off-white tint. Hannibal catches him trying to scent the wine and smirks playfully. Will doesn't scowl really, but he does make a face that probably holds something distantly resembling disapproval.

"How would you capture my essence in a drawing?"

"From your eyes, Will."

As if to make a point, Hannibal shifts slightly, delicately enough that his glass of wine on the tray goes undisturbed, and stares deeply into Will's eyes. He's grown used to looking at Hannibal, but he hasn't quite adapted to Hannibal looking at him. Hannibal has always been able to see him, but under his intense stare Will feels more than exposed.

"What do you see when I look at you, mano myli?"

My love, Will translates instinctively. A warm smile graces Hannibal's face, fully aware of Will's cognition and quite nearly beaming about it. He takes another bite of the eggs, tips back an indulgent drink of wine, and returns his eyes to Will's momentarily, awaiting a response.

"It's kind of like a water molecule, I guess." He sets his chin on Hannibal's shoulder and winds his left arm around Hannibal's bare middle, probing slightly with his fingertips. "Two hydrogen atoms bonded to an oxygen atom." He watches Hannibal take to the sketchbook again with his pencil, the clearer shape of a human face coming into focus. "Independent of the other, hydrogen is highly combustible; oxygen is highly reactive to combustibility. They come together under the wrong conditions, and everything burns."

"But under the right conditions?"

Will eats a red, piquant mass of ground meat. Hannibal's eyes track the motion, probably to make sure he doesn't spill on the bed, though Hannibal has always enjoyed watching Will partake of food he's helped to provide in some way or another. He feeds some to Hannibal, relishing the mischievous glint in his eyes that sometimes leads to adventurous sex on the

violet couch in the library. However, there are mostly filled wine glasses and a half-eaten plate of breakfast currently balanced on the bed, and Hannibal will make him wash the dishes and put the food away before he lets him try anything.

“Under the right conditions, an electron bounces off into the ether and we get valence.”

“A thing that once was merely destructive transitions into a new phase of matter that can be life-giving and transportable.”

“Fire can be life-giving, too.”

Hannibal hums, guiding his pencil with his entire arm. He drinks with his left hand and sets the glass back on the tray beside the plate. He sketches a loosely curled lock of hair, more a wisp of precisely driven graphite than a burst of momentous forethought. The strand goes down past the chin at the bottom of the heart-shaped face.

“Fire supports socioeconomic growth and the expansion of civilizations, but can it truly give life?”

“It protects life.”

Hannibal pauses slightly with his pencil to darken a freckle high up on the cheek just beneath the eye socket of his portrait. He smudges it gently with the pad of his thumb and continues work on the fringe of hair cast across the brow bone and parted on one side.

“I was trying to say that I feel melded to you whenever you look at me like that.”

“Like what, Will?”

“Oh, don’t even start.” Will bumps the side of Hannibal’s head with his forehead in a playful tease. “You play dumb worse than anyone I’ve ever seen. Seriously, do you do it on purpose?”

“Every actor must possess one or two shortcomings.”

“You do hate to let a good joke go to waste.” Will raises his eyebrows once, scanning through his memories. “I’m surprised you don’t get found out just by the sheer amount of cannibal humor that constantly flows out of you.”

“If you recall, you were the one who said *offal is awful* and then promptly requested a spicy sausage be made from said offal.” Hannibal waves the hand holding the pencil at the nearly cleared plate.

Will chuckles in spite of himself. “Offal *is* awful, when you don’t know where it came from.”

“You know exactly where this offal came from,” Hannibal says with an unmistakably proud flourish. “You picked him, in fact.”

“Well, I would have gone with your tailor had I known *that’s* what you were asking me to choose.”

“You’ll need to be fitted again next week. Besides we’ve visited Henri too recently for our association with him to appear merely happenstance in regards to the other bodies attributed to the Ripper in this latest series of murders.”

“The Ripper,” Will repeats the name. He rolls it around and smothers the taste it leaves in his mouth with a long sip of the Riesling.

“Do you find it ill-fitting?”

“You didn’t pick it.”

“That’s the point, is it not?”

Will shrugs. “You rip things; it’s not far from the mark.”

“It’s not incredibly original either.”

“Well, no one ever caught the *first* Ripper; maybe that’s the point.”

“Do you think Jack Crawford meant for that interpretation to become ascribed to the name?”

“If he did, he was probably shooting for irony; the whole, don’t-name-your-ship-Titanic thing.” Hannibal stops drawing to glance quizzically at Will. “Oh, because people thought the ship was unsinkable, but it sank. A serial killer nicknamed after someone who could never be caught, well, that’s the argument.”

Hannibal nods thoughtfully and sketches another wispy curl of hair to frame the face on the other side. He sketches a rough eyebrow.

“What do you think they will call you?”

The breath punches out of Will’s lungs. He squeezes weakly at Hannibal’s side and withdraws his hand, palms gone sweaty at the turn in the conversation.

“I don’t know,” he murmurs, stealing the last bite of chorizo. “Are you still hungry?”

“No, Will. It was delicious, thank you.”

Will forces a tight smile as he’s reaching for the tray. Hannibal drains what remains in his glass and sets it down without letting go. His eyes rove up to Will’s; he’s looking again, for something much more specific this time.

“I think they would give you a name far better suited to you.”

“You mean they’d see more of me in my victims because I would leave traces of myself behind, whereas you don’t.”

He ignores the rush that kicks up low in his chest at the thought of having victims. It isn’t entirely new; he’s felt that rush with Hobbs, he felt it twofold with Yusuf Vartanian, and threefold with Gilbert Parish.

He felt it with every single murder Jack ever asked him to recreate in the *bone arena of his skull*.

“I mean that you are of the exact temperament and calling to engage as well as indulge fully in the delight of the kill.” Hannibal’s lip twitches just barely at one corner. “You have been made to compartmentalize for years against things that hurt you, but if one half of that equation dropped off—if it didn’t hurt you anymore to separate who you are and what you have within you—I believe you would call that valence.”

Hannibal releases the stem of the wine glass and returns to his drawing without preamble. Will blinks at his profile, gulps down the last of his wine, and carries the tray back down to the kitchen. He makes quick work of refrigerating the leftovers, washing the dishes they’ve made, and re-shelving the bottle of Spatlese before tucking the dried dishes away into their specified cabinets. As an afterthought, he dumps the ice in the bucket down the sink and takes the perspiring pail down into the basement and sets it beside the wall. He leans against the supporting beam right at the bottom of the steps and stares straight ahead.

In his dream of Wound Man Hannibal said he had been strapped onto a table directly across from this threshold in such a way that the light from the kitchen could barely be seen. Will walks farther into the room and runs his hand across the brick wall directly adjacent to a large wooden wine rack.

He closes his eyes and imagines the scalpel in his hand, the scalpel Hannibal uses to sharpen his pencils. He imagines cutting him open from xiphoid process to navel and reaching in the way he had been instructed to in his own dream back when he ran his car off the side of the road into a tree; when Hannibal had literally been the wendigo and Will had been the one to destroy him, causing his own destruction in turn.

He finds it strange how Hannibal’s dream rang nearly on an apologetic, unfailingly adoring chord. He had touched Will when he woke, tracing those places where he had been hurt in his sleep as if they were affectionate at some rudimentary level that went much deeper than the facts of anatomy and design.

Will staggers away from the wall, sneaking into that territory of intangible things that he had resolved at a very young age, ironically, not to venture into intentionally. He climbs back up the steps and looks down into that dark pit of buried architecture for a moment longer before closing the door and making for the other stairs that lead to the bedrooms. Hannibal is much farther along on the sketch than when Will left him. The eyes have taken their basic shapes, almond-like and very open with several distinguished flecks within the shaded irises.

He peers down at the drawing over Hannibal’s shoulder for a moment before stepping his knee up onto the bed directly behind him and laying his forehead in between the man’s shoulder blades.

“You think they’d call me something specific like what they called Hobbs?”

“I would predict something less totemic.”

“So what, they’ll call me flower, too?”

Hannibal turns a vaguely entertained glance on him.

“Too? Didn’t you know I really have been calling you horse all this time?”

A wide smile spreads across Will’s face before he can do anything to stop it and he’s laughing. He shoves at Hannibal’s shoulder, safe since he’s taken his pencil off the page, and Hannibal grins. Something about it, something about the way it exudes a little bit of danger and a little bit more of a warning, completely melts through everything else, and he can’t believe he hasn’t found a foolproof way to safeguard himself from it yet.

“Still,” he breathes, reaching out to weave his fingers through Hannibal’s hair. He shakes his head, a shaky smile trying to claim his lips. “You still do that to me. What are you?”

“You know better than anyone what I am.”

Will had said something once about the Ripper before he could put the name to a face.

They let it die, but it doesn’t die. He looks normal and nobody can tell what he is.

He doesn’t say that; he can’t say it, not to Hannibal.

“Are you the two hydrogen atoms or the oxygen atom?”

Hannibal drops his eyes to Will’s throat contemplatively.

“Both of us will sacrifice; each of us reacts to the other’s presence as pure oxygen would to a flame. The components that combine to construct a water molecule cannot be partitioned into smaller parts than they are at a bonded level. Otherwise, they are merely two types of accelerant, as you said.”

Will touches Hannibal’s arm, a questing, lazy touch.

“That’s sort of…poetic.” Will furrows his eyebrows once and chuckles softly. “We were fire at first because we hadn’t adhered to each other yet.”

“To expand on your metaphor,” Hannibal muses softly, turning slightly and gently placing the rough sketch of his sister on the floor beside the bed. “Are we still fire, or have we transitioned?”

Hannibal’s soft smile has a contagious mirth to it, and Will finds himself smirking even as Hannibal turns completely to straddle Will’s lap. His chin grazes Will’s temple, and that tiny force of friction stokes at the few sparks gathered in the pit of his stomach. He sighs and searches out a spot to take with his tongue, teeth, and lips. He settles for Hannibal’s neck since he’s making a show of denying Will that burning kiss that he hungers for more than he has for food or for sleep this past week.

“Middle ground,” Will sighs. “Steam, or…” He fists one hand in Hannibal’s hair and drags his other down that long expanse of skin at his back. “I don’t know; electricity?”

Hannibal presses his forehead against Will's and twists gently away in time to miss the assault to his mouth that Will very eagerly attempts. Softly, he says, "You have a fever."

"I've been trying to get your pants off since I woke up," Will mutters. He grabs at Hannibal's backside as if to make a point but really just to touch, if he's being honest. He represses the groan fighting to escape his lips when Hannibal presses the back of a cool hand to his cheek and then to the side of his neck.

More to himself than to Will, Hannibal says, "I thought we would have more time."

"We have time." Will takes his wrist and kisses his knuckles, the pisiform bone, and the mound of his palm. "We have this, right now; it's something." In Hannibal's unguarded moment of thought, Will takes that long-coveted kiss and holds, savoring the smooth give of Hannibal's lips and the spicy, peachy smell of him left over from breakfast. He tastes a little bit like lemon and cardamom when Will licks at the plump bottom lip so freely and beautifully offered.

Hannibal shifts his hips so their bodies brush and press together all the ways Will has found himself starved for since he started to feel better coming off the cumbersome drug regimen he'd been on. Will licks into Hannibal's mouth and feels his all-time favorite sound bounce around temporarily inside his mouth. Hannibal gasps and crushes his chest to Will's, tightening his fingers in his hair and panting into his mouth.

Will's phone rings. His reaction is almost immediate.

"No."

"Will."

"No. No, no, no. It can go to voicemail."

"You've been out almost a month; Jack Crawford must have come across something quite important to call you so early."

Hannibal is still moving his hips sinuously against Will's stomach but nowhere that'll give him any kind of relief.

The phone rings a fourth time. Hannibal reaches for it on the bedside table and sets it in Will's hand before curling his fingers around it.

Petulantly and with an obvious hitch in his breathing, Will says, "You need to stop doing that if I'm going to take this call."

"Doing—"

Will surges forward, the back of Hannibal's neck held firmly in one hand, and silences him with an aggressive, nearly violent kiss that Hannibal clearly enjoys if the abrupt, loud moan that erupts out of him is any indication.

"Don't say, *Doing what*."

He hastily answers on either the eighth or ninth ring and tries very hard to pass off his breathlessness as exhaustion from having been woken up by the phone ringing. Hannibal, thankfully, behaves himself and stills all movement.

“Jack?”

“Will, Abel Gideon escaped from custody this morning. He had a court date today; we found the vehicle they were using to move him, but everyone’s dead. I wanted you to come take a look, if you were feeling up to it.”

Will blanks on the proper response. It had been so nice to be away from it all, from the noise.

“Uh, yeah, sure, Jack. Where’s the crime scene?”

“Twenty minute drive out from Baltimore, near Essex.”

“Just text me the directions; I’ll be there.”

Jack says something in the affirmative and disconnects the call. Will stares dumbly at the screen. He didn’t ask if Will was in Wolf Trap or if he was already in Baltimore. If he was in Wolf Trap, he could be forgiven for taking a full hour to get to the crime scene. Odds are no one would even ask.

“What will you do?”

Will doesn’t jump, to his credit. Hannibal is pretty adept at reading minds when he cares to delve into that sort of thing. It’s not mindreading, per se; it’s just something astoundingly similar and occasionally unnerving.

“I think,” he drawls, tossing his phone aside and running his hands up Hannibal’s chest. “They can hold the fort down for a little while.”

“Is that any way to start fresh?” Hannibal bites Will’s upper lip and then his bottom lip. He doesn’t mind in the slightest if Will chooses to be irresponsible. There’s a psychological term for that, when a person maintains a commendable level of self-control and then fails to keep it up after the event horizon has been passed.

“What is that called?” Will twists out of the shirt that he only put on at all so the grease in the pan wouldn’t pop at him when he cooked breakfast. He presses back into the bed so Hannibal can shuck his pants off and then rid himself of his own immediately after. “When you can’t hold back your cravings anymore because you’ve been holding them back for too long?”

“Ego depletion,” Hannibal pants hotly into his ear. He bites at the cartilage and reassumes his position astride Will. He rolls his hips so that Will’s erection rubs in between his cheeks, and attuned to that sensation as much as he would be to water in the desert, Will bucks up into that warm, inviting flesh.

“Let me fuck you,” Will rasps, groping blindly at Hannibal’s sides and at his arms. “I want to fuck you, Hannibal.”

The column of Hannibal's neck flashes a luminous, speckled red; that color migrates across his collar bone and through his chest the way a cloud casts darkness upon the earth when it passes over the sun.

He spreads himself out over Will so he can reach into the bedside table and procure lubricant. He takes out a condom, too, which Will figures is probably more to minimize the mess of the inevitable outcome. Will handles that job as soon as the small wrapped square hits the bed, leaning back to watch Hannibal open himself up with his fingers. Just to be cruel, Will slides the palm of his hand up and down Hannibal's shaft, too gently to be satisfying but enough sensation to drive him up the wall.

Hannibal grunts, muscles in his arm straining to push deep enough into himself. Will braces his hand against Hannibal's forearm to quicken the pace, and that simple gesture of assistance does magnificent things to the expression on his face.

Before too long, his hips begin to undulate to meet in time with his fingers; his dick presses wet and smooth against Will's stomach. It's a beautiful tease, and they need to move on.

Will kisses Hannibal's neck, breathing and licking and asking for permission. Hannibal nods slightly so his hair brushes Will's forehead and their noses bump together. He adores seeing Hannibal this way, winded and flushed and nearly delirious with that primal drive fighting to overtake him completely. It's a losing battle trying to contain it; Will wouldn't have it any other way.

He pulls Hannibal's hand away and sets his own sticky hands on Hannibal's hips, moving him so they line up more fluidly. They rut shallowly against each other, ready but waiting on a way to organize themselves. Hannibal sighs and tips his head back to bare his throat.

"You always like it on your stomach."

The mental image, not unfamiliar to Will's fantasies, is pleasure injected straight into the softest part of his belly where all the warmth has been coiling up into a singular ball of heat and arousal.

Will chokes on a groan. "Do you want me to do that to you?"

Hannibal slips off of him and rolls over onto his back. Will leans on his elbow and looks down at him.

"I want you to take me."

His nostrils flare as he obeys the command almost immediately and flips Hannibal onto his side before dragging him back by the hips. Hannibal's back and shoulders flex as he spreads his legs wider beneath Will. He settles into a kneeling position behind Hannibal and guides himself in. The swear tripping off Hannibal's lips and the way his body tenses and locks up for just a second before loosening, Will could get happily drunk on all of it. He could stay like this with Hannibal, inside of Hannibal, and never want anything else.

The one thing he does want at this particular moment, however, is movement. Hannibal obliges, giving the first signal before Will dares to just take what he wants. Hannibal tilts his hips back in open invitation, and Will grasps one hipbone firmly in his hand and plants the other beside Hannibal's head before pulling away and then plowing back in.

Hannibal always makes so much noise whenever Will takes the top. When he mans the ship he's very careful not to show how he feels until he's moments from spilling, but of course, as he said, the man needed a flaw in his otherwise infallible restraint.

Will's been in Hannibal's place enough times to sympathize; he's been the one with his face buried in the pillow to muffle his feral growling and the occasional scream, fingers clenching the sheets, spine arched as far as the bones will allow like that of a stretching feline, and toes curling at every brush of feverish flesh against fraught, incendiary nerves scraping and teasing and combusting on the inside. The tendons in Hannibal's neck strain as he forces to keep himself from hiding the way Will often does when his pleasure begins to chip away more at his exterior.

"Damn it, damn it," Will whispers into the base of Hannibal's neck. He leans over the side to leave tender bites up the trail of a pulsing vein and suckles at a spot behind Hannibal's ear obscured by his hairline.

"I see why… *Nušvilpimas*…" Hannibal groans and licks his lips, panting and clawing at the blankets. "You feel animal when I have you from behind." Will gasps and kisses a spot on Hannibal's shoulder blade in confirmation. "You allow yourself to—to…" Hannibal's hips roll back into Will's; he drops his head forward and pushes back with increasing abandon.

Innocently but breathlessly, Will asks him, "I allow myself to what, mano myliu?" A high reedy moan spirits out of Hannibal's swollen, red mouth. Will kisses him, swallows up all the moans, and grunts his words against Hannibal's chin, just as much an animal as he ever was in his presence: "What do you see, brangiojite?"

"We are merely—" Hannibal's body spasms around the jolt to his prostate. Will resolves never to forget how to find this precious switch within this sometimes infuriating, intolerable man; he can never forget the single-most effective way to silence and awaken and free Hannibal. There's so much about everything they are that Will won't ever be able to let go of, though he must and soon.

"What are we, baby?" Will groans into Hannibal's throat, breathless. He changes his angle slightly to allow himself better leverage and takes off as fast and as hard as he can, in spite of Hannibal's familiar requests: *greitesnis, stipriau, daugiau.*

"We are the waves crashing and calling the moon; we are the fires that build and destroy the world; we…*we are*…I'm…"

Will's arms shake supporting his increased pace, but he can't stop, and the breaths he allows himself to take come quicker and shorter the closer he gets. He doesn't touch Hannibal, and when the man untangles his fingers from the sheets where they've come messily untucked from beneath the mattress, Will holds him down by the wrists to keep him just where he is on the precipice, untouched and panicked with the need to rectify the first of his problems.

"Will," Hannibal growls, disturbing their easy, though rapid, rhythm. Most of Will's weight rests on him with his hands busy restraining Hannibal, *holding him down.*

Their bodies stick and slide, and some bump in each man's singular goal of getting the other to finish has Will bending down to bite Hannibal's throat and Hannibal pushing up to his elbows, probably, to kiss Will. Hannibal's brow bone collides solidly with Will's cheek, and he swears he can hear their skulls clack together as instantaneous as a car backfiring.

"Ow, shit."

Rubbing delicately at his forehead with his now freed hand, Hannibal grumbles, "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," Will chuckles a little bit hysterically. "Jesus, you have a hard head. Why am I not surprised?"

"The skull is a complex amalgamation of bones, joints, and ossifications."

"I actually just meant that you can be a stubborn ass sometimes." Hannibal squints, brings his left hand over his right shoulder, and flicks at Will's nose. Will laughs; he can't not every time Hannibal flicks his nose to show his dissatisfaction with something. He presses his lips to Hannibal's shoulder and kisses the cooling skin there gently, eyes soft and locked on Hannibal's. He chances a joke. "If we were wendigos, our antlers would be all tangled up after that."

Hannibal actually chuckles a little at that, if softly. The minute movement generated in their laughter stirs that quieter rumbling teasing at the base of Will's spine.

Hoping the answer is no, Will asks, "Do you want me to stop?"

Rather than answer, Hannibal pivots slightly onto his side so he can touch Will's chest and map with his fingers the faint scar on Will's chest where he was stabbed years ago before they met. Hannibal tilts his head at a slight angle and looks up at Will, too innocently.

"What was it you said about my head, Will?"

"I said that it's hard." He raises an eyebrow at Hannibal's self-satisfied smirk and then gets the joke. "Oh, you—" He leans down and kisses Hannibal, tilting his hips and getting them moving before any other words can be exchanged. Their pace is about half what it was before, but Will doesn't mind it. He's actually still shaking a little bit with his laughter, and the slight vibration it generates between them is new and comfortable.

"My skull must be made of steel," Hannibal remarks, slightly out of breath and thumbing at the tender spot on Will's cheek.

"I *told* you."

The tiny rubbing and humming of their chests buzzing together in mutual laughter is a better kind of synthesis. Hannibal grins and moves with Will, and they never quite lose their momentum or the shared moment of hilarity; one second of time just burns slowly into the

next. Their bodies slide together, and their breaths grow ragged all over again. Will pauses to pull back slightly and turn Hannibal properly on his back so he can align their bodies as if the contours of where Hannibal begins and where Will ends are two halves of the same nesting doll simply slotting together.

Will laces their fingers together and presses the backs of Hannibal's hands into the pillow on either side of his head. Their bodies jolt and grind and sing, and searching Will's eyes and only faintly struggling against Will's hands, Hannibal's eyes drift closed and his body rocks up into Will's, moving out of pure instinct alone.

Hannibal comes with a low, relieved groan and Will follows after him some six or seven rough pushes later. Their bodies flutter and pulse around each other, and Hannibal looks every bit as devastatingly ordinary and unkempt as he did when they woke up this morning curled up in each other and whispering in the dark.

Groggily, Hannibal mumbles, "Don't be late to Essex, Will."

Will sighs, pulls away from Hannibal, and tends to the disposal of the condom, which is less graceful than when Hannibal does it but gets the job done without spillage nonetheless. He flops back into bed for a moment just to sap the remaining warmth from Hannibal's endorphin plunge, though he apparently doesn't need the extra heat with things going back to the way they used to be.

"What's the story with Georgia Madchen?"

"You may tell them what you like; let them think she committed suicide, let them think the copycat killed Sutcliffe and killed her to silence her."

Will nods, staring blankly at the ceiling. This is his life; this is what he chose. He looks over at Hannibal, catching his breath with his eyes closed and face totally relaxed. He chose Hannibal; Hannibal chose him.

"I'm going to tell them the truth—about her, I mean; I can't let them…misunderstand her." He closes his eyes tightly. "No one ever understood her, not even at the end. I can give her this one truth at least." He looks at Hannibal, something pinched and controlled in the tight set of his jaw. "Can't I?"

"You may do whatever you wish, Will."

"What happens if I do this?"

"We will have less time than either of us stipulated."

"Oh, it's Sunday." Will smacks his forehead with the palm of one hand and scratches at his scalp.

"I will call Abigail and inform her of your situation."

"We need to meet with her sometime this week. I already pushed it a lot by making it today, and now this." Will sits with his legs hanging over the edge of the bed. He holds his head in

his hands and sighs, none of his exhaustion coming from nearly two rounds in the sack with Hannibal.

A firm hand presses into the dorsum of his ribcage, fingertips kneading at the nerves near and branching out from his spinal cord. Hannibal eases his hand up to Will's shoulder and squeezes; he sits up behind him and presses a kiss to his hair. Hannibal's hands are slipping around his middle when he catches his hands shaking and not as a side effect of corticosteroids this time.

"Everything will be all right, gėlyte."

Will can't find the right words to say for what feels like a short eternity. He settles on an obvious, vulnerable truth.

"We trust you."

"I know you do."

"Don't…" Will sighs and tries to find the words again without losing his breath before he can get them out. "Don't betray us."

"You're not the man you were trying to be when we met anymore."

"What does that mean?"

Hannibal kisses the shell of Will's ear and his temple; he leaves a more delicate brush of his lips against what already feels like a hell of a bruise high on his cheekbone.

"You weren't fit to play this game then. Well, it isn't a game," Hannibal hedges, on the cusp of saying something turbulent and frightening that could change everything, but he backs away from that ledge and onto another. He says, "You weren't a man I feared then; you feared too much on your own, too much of yourself."

"But the man I am now," Will mumbles.

"Were I to break an oath with you, I would be signing my own death certificate."

Will turns to look at Hannibal over his shoulder, something strange and cold and dark seeping into his chest as he registers the lack of fear in Hannibal's eyes. He wants there to be fear there but not because he has become something fear-inspiring; he wants there to be fear because while much has changed to have brought him here to Hannibal's bed on this exact morning, much of who he had forever been had needed to remain intact for any of it to have happened.

"Don't misunderstand me," Will whispers. He turns his head to nip softly at Hannibal's bottom lip. Mouths touching and breaths intermingling, he continues, "You may have pointed me North, but I am who I've always been." There's a shift in the flow of air throughout the room; it feels colder. He can feel the hairs on Hannibal's arms raised where they remain pressed up against his ribs.

“Of course, Will.”

He takes his arms back, and Will makes for the shower. Essex is twenty minutes out; he’s been here with Hannibal for about forty-five minutes, leaving him fifteen for a quick shower before he begins to look suspicious. He moves quickly just in case and emerges from the steamy bathroom a good eight minutes ahead of schedule. He pulls his shoes on from his side of the bed nearest the window and farthest from the door to the hall. Hannibal is sitting on his side dutifully sketching. He’s nearly finished and he only began it that morning.

Lacing up his shoes and standing to leave, he pauses in the doorway. Hannibal’s hand stutters for the briefest moment, but he doesn’t look away from his drawing.

Almost positive he doesn’t want to know, he asks, “Would you have *broken an oath* with me before?”

Hannibal says nothing and through his own determination not to leave the house upset with him, Will turns and leaves. He’s in the driveway backing carefully out onto the street when he thinks more about their arrangement. Hannibal had created the Copy Cat’s M.O. fully intending to frame Will; that was really the only plausible explanation, the only one that made sense.

In the event that Will didn’t want to play ball, he had a failsafe; in the event Will very much wanted to play ball, he had insurance to keep them inextricably bound together.

The next time I catch you lying to me I won’t take it sitting down, Hannibal.

Will swallows and stares hard at the red light at Eastern and North Point.

It will displease you to know this, but I find myself quite interested in what will happen if I lie to you again.

Hannibal’s first mistake was to assert that one of his old lies wouldn’t come back to haunt him.

The light turns green. Will drives on beneath the Baltimore Beltway, the route Bowman and the others had used to trace back to the place where they’d killed Parish in the woods. There’s slush on the roads and a few flurries in the air. He’ll be at the scene soon, but he doesn’t need to see what Gideon did to know how this particular subplot in their story arch ends.

He will kill Gideon or Hannibal will, and when that is done, they will be left once more to deal with each other.

He’d quite like to kill Gideon; it would only be poetic justice for the supposed Copy Cat Killer to do away with the supposed Chesapeake Ripper. He almost hopes he’ll get to do it now. Hannibal would appreciate the irony.

Maybe he’d appreciate the warning as well. All stories harbor morals, after all.

He would do well to learn from them, from the foolish things people do when they forget who they are and what drives them. He had thought Will would be one of them; he had anticipated it even as he hoped against it.

He pulls up to the stretch of road and immediately clocks the transport vehicle with its doors flung open and the blood staining the snow on the side of the road. It's like stepping into an old suit getting out of the car and approaching the emptied truck as a path opens up around him. Jack waves the rest of them away. He notices Price and Zeller tip-toeing around a bloody display of organs in the brush.

The wind quiets as their footsteps fade; the cold is a numbing atmosphere that sits in his bones and rests within his skin and muscles.

I want to live inside of your bones and to breathe beneath your skin.

The pendulum swings through the black.

I want to be there, always; a scar to remind you that this is real and that it always will be.

It swings a second time.

A victim seen as blameless.

The silver blur of a blade rushes down the guillotine into the empty, continuing void.

A victim unseen and overlooked.

Will waits in the blackness until the voices, Hannibal's voices overlapped and drowning out each previous remark, cease. He waits until the image clears, until he is no longer himself, no longer a man chained to a body or chained to a warped ideal or domestic fantasy of love. He waits until all that is him can be cleanly divorced and scourged from this experience; he waits until that vital electron clinging to him desperately relinquishes its hold.

He smiles, valent.

"All I need is a hand free."

All I ever need is a hand free.

Chapter End Notes

Chorizo and Eggs
http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/chorizo_and_eggs/

Mexican Chorizo
http://allrecipes.com/recipe/mexican-chorizo/

Heinz Eifel Riesling Spatlese 2011
http://www.wine.com/v6/Heinz-Eifel-Riesling-Spatlese-2011/wine/123881/detail.aspx

Mano myliu = My love

Nušvilpimas = Damnation (expletive)

Brangiojite = Sweetheart

Gėlyte = Flower

Greitesnis, stipriau, daugiau = Faster, stronger (harder, I guess), more

When The Music's Over

Chapter Summary

He catches insane men because he can think like them, because he is insane.

Chapter Notes

Come back, baby, back into my arm/We're getting' tired of hangin' around/Waiting around with our heads to the ground/I hear a very gentle sound/Very near yet very far/Very soft, yeah, very clear/Come today, come today

Le cadavre exquis boira le vin nouveau/The exquisite corpse will drink the new wine.
—Andre Breton

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"The waistcoat is a bit much," Will mumbles uncertainly. He holds the flaps of the suit jacket out to the sides and rotates his body slightly to the left. A slight frown mars his mouth. "Not all of us can pull off a three piece."

"I want everyone to know I bought you this suit, Will." Will opens his mouth to retort, but Hannibal turns instead to face Henri who irrelevantly adjusts the right shoulder with pins. "I think a single-breasted jacket would suit him better." Will starts to shrug out of the ill-fitting jacket. Hannibal slips the loosely knotted tie out from beneath the collar and tugs until it comes undone completely. "See if you can find something closer to slate than gray or black." He hands it to Henri, barely concealing his impatience.

Will watches the man scurry off with the tie and jacket and threads his fingers through Hannibal's where they rest stationary on his collar bone.

"Really, Hann, the plainest suit on me is going to look like a king's robe."

“Be that as it may,” he begins, shaking his head curtly at Henri as he starts to walk in with a tie at least three shades too light to be even mercifully considered slate. He waits for Henri to hurry out of the room again. “The king does not wear the robe because it makes him look regal; he wears the robe because it symbolizes his status and because no one else may wear it but for him.”

Will hums thoughtfully, squeezing Hannibal’s fingers. He stares blankly over his shoulder at Henri when he comes back into the room. Hannibal huffs an irritated sigh at the inky black tie in the man’s hands.

“No.” He corrals him out of the room, mostly for his benefit, and fixes him with a hard stare. “Please bring Jessica.”

His face pales, but he goes without any objections. Hannibal steps back into the changing room and finds Will absently running a hand through his hair. He finds his eyes in the mirror and drops his arm to his side.

“Maybe you’re a little hard on him.”

“He will find his legs in this industry eventually, but not today.” He comes to stand beside Will and watches him in the mirror. “You look good on a pedestal, Will.”

He snorts a laugh and says, “Maybe that’s because you’ve always had me up on one.” Hannibal looks up the six or so inches the platform allows Will over him. His fingers wander over Hannibal’s shoulder, sparking and tickling in his chest and in his belly. The curtain behind them swishes open; in walks a tall woman a mite younger than him with black hair elegantly piled atop her head in a neat, simple bun. She grins conspiratorially at Hannibal and accepts his greeting warmly.

“You know, Hannibal, these young ones will never learn if they don’t get their hours in.”

“Constructive criticism can be enough of a lesson in itself.”

She tosses a wind chime of a laugh his way before turning an assessing eye on Will and softening her smile. She extends her hand and he takes it. “Jessica Sergeant; you must be Will Graham.”

“Yeah, it’s nice to meet you.”

“So what are we working with here, boys?” She rounds Will’s back and clinically pulls and pinches one side of the pant leg. She glances deviously at Hannibal and asks, dark eyes twinkling, “Special occasion?”

“Will is overdue for a good suit. Every man needs at least one, don’t you find?”

“Death and taxes and men’s attire; a man after my own heart, as always,” she jokes. Hannibal sees Will glancing at the hand still testing the give of his trousers, her left hand absent of a wedding ring. He smiles and informs her of his wishes for the remainder of the suit: a single-

breasted jacket complete with a slate tie and off-white pocket square. “I’ll do you one better than that.” She winks and twirls out of the room after quickly re-taking Will’s measurements.

“Friendly,” Will mutters, turning back to face the mirror and fiddle with the buttoned cuff at the end of one sleeve. He tugs at the waistcoat and makes a face.

“If you were wondering, she has a son with an Austrian-born sailor; they have been together, happily, for nearly fourteen years now.”

With a subdued chord of pleased petulance, he says, “I wasn’t.” He bites his lip and glances away from the mirror to lock eyes with Hannibal, his mouth twitching into a teasing smirk. “You never told me how Pierpoint was.”

Hannibal frowns. “I have been there with you in the past.”

“This time you weren’t with me.”

“It was unremarkable and not worth discussion.” Will shuffles on the platform, gazing down at his feet to hide the wide smile stretching across his face. He is too high up for Hannibal to smother it with his lips so he settles instead for pinching Will’s leg through his slacks.

“Ow,” Will laughs, twisting away from Hannibal’s hands. “That wasn’t even a good lie.”

It’s quite apparent to Hannibal that they are, in fact, talking about the same mundanely insignificant person. Masking his sneer, he says, “He reminded me of an old patient.”

Will doesn’t have to ask who Hannibal means. He shakes his head lightly but then furrows his eyebrows, a realization dawning on him. “I should have seen it,” he murmurs to himself. “You—”

The curtain swishes open again, and Jessica waltzes in easily with a coal black jacket slung over one dark arm, a smooth length of perfect slate fabric draped over the larger folded item, and a blue and gray patterned pocket square cradled delicately in her free hand.

“If you’re really not going to let me put him in something colorful, a splash will have to appease me.” She sets the pile of clothes on a simplistic wooden chair in the corner of the room and sets to work on making adjustments to the jacket once it’s settled around Will’s shoulders. He fumbles endearingly with the tie, righting the collar with steady hands.

Will asks her, “You don’t think the waistcoat is too much?”

She studies him with careful, deceptively warm eyes. “It’s only unbecoming if you think it is, though I suppose we can’t all be as casually ornate as some people.” She shoots Hannibal an amused glance that reveals more of what she thinks about Will than just her opinion of his style. “I think it makes you look very distinguished.”

Will is not at all convinced but says nothing else. There is a strange expression on his face somewhere in between a displeased pout and a smug half-smile. Hannibal would ask if Jessica were not in the room, but as it is, Will cannot give him the kind of answer he seeks in the presence of a potential witness. Jessica doesn’t move to make small talk in the silence of

their fitting room, which Hannibal is grateful for and assumes Will is as well. She carries out the rest of her work quickly and efficiently, well-accustomed to the way Hannibal prefers for services to be rendered.

She leaves the room to let Will undress; Hannibal stays at his side, uninterested in whatever Jessica might deign to say to him should he give her even the smallest window of opportunity. They don't speak in her absence, but the atmosphere is much more comfortable with just the two of them, Hannibal notes.

Will doesn't fuss at the register about payment. Rather than fight him on the high cost of the suit he doesn't want, he gives Hannibal a kiss on the cheek as he's signing his name on the bill, disrupting the last few strokes of his signature.

Jessica's eyes crinkle at the corners, but she says nothing. Hannibal can see that some aspect of her attitude toward Will has shifted with this singular act of affection, and he wouldn't care at all except his face is warm as they leave the shop, and that response disconcerts him. He carries the suit over his arm in a modest white bag and fusses uselessly with the hanger. Will dutifully walks beside him, carrying a box of new black shoes under one arm. They walk out to the car, set the items in the backseat, and drive. Hannibal avoids the freeway, preferring to make this drive last.

"You killed Franklin Froidevaux."

"Tobias would have killed him anyway."

"You did it spite him?" Hannibal turns to look at Will, but his eyes are distantly looking out through the windshield at the snow.

"I thought you were murdered." Will swallows and gives him his attention. "He came in bleeding, claiming he had killed two men prior to stopping at my practice."

In a tone that suggests he has known for quite some time, Will says, "But you knew that he would try when you sent me to him."

Determined not to ask how long ago Will deduced as much, Hannibal concedes his point: "I knew he would try."

"You pointed me at him like a loaded gun." He shakes his head. "You were hoping I'd kill him so he wouldn't be able to implicate you because…*He* was your dinner guest, the guy who ran out the back door when I came in that night?"

"There's nothing to be done about the man's manners."

"Tell me the truth, Hannibal." Will crosses his arms over his chest. "This thing with Gideon, how do you see it ending, really?"

"I suspect one of us will kill him." Hannibal glances at Will to register the lack of a reaction on his face. "But you knew that much already."

Will shrugs. “I wanted to hear you say it.” A short pause stutters between them. “They’re getting close, you know, or they think they are. Dealing with him is going to force our hand.”

Hannibal turns onto his street and parks, switching the engine off.

“If we can anticipate what will need to be done when that time comes, we may yet control the tide.”

Will stares at his hands, splaying his fingers and stretching the skin of his palms. Hannibal reaches over and laces his fingers through Will’s. He doesn’t pull away from him.

“Chilton admits to psychic driving. He has left Abel Gideon without an identity wanting for a plan.”

“No, he doesn’t want a *plan*. The thing he’s looking for is connection,” Will corrects him. He gives Hannibal a meaningful look, blue eyes boring deeply into his. “His aim is to know you, draw you out if he can. He needs to know that he isn’t you.”

“Then I suspect he will find a way to lure me,” Hannibal says, running his thumb along the back of Will’s hand. He continues, “In the only way that he knows how.”

“He’ll kill someone else.” Will’s eyes dart back and forth between Hannibal’s hands. “He has Freddie Lounds with him now. Who do you think he’ll target next? The working theory is former psychiatrists.”

“There will be plenty more where Carruthers came from, I expect. What reason else has he to kill but to exact his revenge?”

“Right,” Will sighs. He leans back in his seat, distractedly squeezing Hannibal’s hand. His eyes look out at the snow blanketing the yard, eyebrows twitching up to his hairline once. “Well, there’s Chilton.”

“Among a handful of others, yes.”

“What’ll happen to him?”

“Whatever Gideon wants to happen to him, Will. Shall we go inside?”

“Just wait a minute.” Will closes his eyes and rests his head back, exposing his throat and the dip of his suprasternal notch. Hannibal lingers a while on the sight, committing the swoop of Will’s hidden collar bone to memory alongside the sloping curve of his Adam’s apple as it bobs once with a hard swallow. “Did you ever treat Abel Gideon?”

“No, Will.” He brushes Will’s hair back from his forehead, noting the fever brewing just beneath his skin and scenting the freshly inflamed membranes of his right hemisphere with both immense longing and stabbing regret. “Alana did, years ago.”

Will opens his eyes.

“Tell me you wouldn’t hurt her.”

“I won’t. You have my word.” Will searches his eyes, more than a little angry at the prospect of anyone harming Alana Bloom. “You know when I lie to you, Will. Am I lying now?”

Will drops his eyes, contemplating something he does not give words to. He only says, “No.”

Hannibal readies himself to inquire further, but Will pulls his hand away and exits the car. He takes the shoebox from the backseat and crosses the driveway to the front door, letting himself in with his key. Hannibal sits a while in the car and ponders their situation. It could have been predicted, something as tedious as a case of mistaken identity coming between them and souring these last hours. He sighs and goes the same way up the drive, taking the suit with him and carefully holding the ends of the bag up above the slush. Once inside he locks up and hangs his coat in the foyer beside Will’s.

He climbs the stairs and sets the suit bag up in the closet in his room. The shoebox containing the black Larsey Oxfords rests on the floor beneath the coatrack. Hannibal closes the door to the closet, shrugs off his jacket, and leaves the bedroom to look for Will. He is about to go searching in the kitchen when he notices the light on in the library. He goes to investigate and pushes the door open to the sound of books hitting the floor.

Will looks at him over his shoulder, dropping another book as he does. There are a few scattered at his feet and several more jumbled together in his arms.

“Will, what are you doing?”

“You know what I’m doing, Hannibal.” He throws another book. “Maybe Gideon isn’t the only one trying to connect with you these days.” A particularly heavy red book hits the floor. “Maybe we’re all a bit lost as the days wind down.”

A book fights out of his hold and falls with the one he tosses down intentionally. The last book he holds close to his chest. Hannibal approaches him warily.

“Who else have you killed that I don’t know about?”

Is that what this is about?

“There are many others of whom it never mattered for you to know.”

“And you get to decide that, do you?” Will mutters, releasing the other book in such a way that the spine does not open for him but stays closed. Two others have landed in such ways, leaving more of a puzzle than perhaps Will had intended. Hannibal gazes down at the books and sits on the edge of the couch, running his fingers along the deep violet fabric.

“You know of everyone that matters, Will. Franklin never mattered, not even to Tobias Budge.”

“None of them ever matter to you, but I do matter, and you let me think all this time that you were the victim.” Will shakes his head and sinks down into a sitting position amid the books on the floor. “You never *told* me you knew about Budge; you just left me to figure it out on

my own." He touches the corner of a closed black leather book and turns it over to reveal the German title across the cover.

Bitterly, Will continues, "Did you do that because you didn't care, or were you hoping I would just forget about you sending me to him like a lamb to the slaughter?" He laughs sardonically. "Or was it both?"

"Tobias Budge was an obstacle, just like Abel Gideon is an obstacle," Hannibal says, forcing some steel into his voice that he does not quite feel. "I led you into that confrontation with him because I wanted you to face him." Gaining heat in his conviction, Hannibal adds, "If you were merely a lamb I would have no use for you."

Will turns on him, eyes hard and jaw set.

"You would have *no*," he enunciates, nostrils flaring and eyes narrowing. "*Use* for me, did I hear that right?"

Hannibal thinks to bolt but will not; he will never run from Will, not ever again. The only thing he can do to show Will as much is hold his eyes and not look away, even if the betrayal and twisting fury burning off of Will in this moment stings him with its truth and its justification.

Caught up as he is in his mind, it takes Hannibal too long to realize that he hasn't provided Will with an answer.

"I'm like a tool to you, a weapon." Will faces the books again, upsetting the cold in Hannibal's chest. "If you can't use me to hurt people, then what good am I?"

Hannibal touches Will's shoulder and his hand is shrugged off. Not to be deterred, he moves down beside Will on the floor and drags him back down when he tries to stand. The best way to keep Will where he doesn't want to be, as evidenced from past experience, is to physically obstruct his escape. He employs the most effective method he's discovered thus far and places himself in Will's lap so he can't get up. Will heaves an agitated sigh.

"You can't just sit on me every time we have an argument."

"I can for this argument," Hannibal counters. He manacles Will's wrists with his fingers and presses his hands by his hips on the floor. "If you are upset about the way Tobias Budge was handled, then ask me."

Will's confusion is palpable, even if he does well to hide it behind his rage. He snarls, "Ask you what?"

Hannibal watches him carefully. He isn't quite sure what to say, but perhaps this discomfiting vulnerability is the point. He tries, "What would that tell you if I fed you the question?"

Will's breathing changes; his eyes widen slightly.

"What went through your head when you thought Budge killed me?" He yanks his hands out from beneath Hannibal's, his hold having weakened at the inquiry. Hannibal licks his lips and

glances at the book just beside Will's thigh. Will takes his cheek in his hand and makes Hannibal focus only on him. "What *exactly* were you thinking?"

"I…" Hannibal leans to the side to worm his way out of Will's lap, but arms close around him.

"This works both ways," Will taunts, the edge gone from his voice and replaced with curiosity. He bends his knees so Hannibal's body presses up against Will's chest and traps him in place with nowhere to go and nowhere to look but at Will. His knees dig into the floor uncomfortably, causing him to squirm before he can think to stop himself. Will settles him with a hand to his flank. "What were you thinking, Hannibal?"

"I told you I was worried."

Will whispers, "What else?"

"I felt alone." His voice doesn't sound like his own, but he chooses not to trouble with it. "I thought you were gone."

Will's eyes glisten, and while the veracity of his statements speak for themselves, Hannibal can't help but guess at whether they were the right answers. Will kisses him abruptly with teeth and voice and with his nose smashing into Hannibal's cheek. The question melts off his tongue. Will keeps their foreheads touching with his hand splayed across the back of Hannibal's neck.

"You're going to retaliate, aren't you?"

Thoroughly thwarted off his train of thought, Hannibal asks breathlessly, "How do you mean, Will?"

"Gideon won't stop until he thinks he's baited you, until he's found you." His fingers curl and uncurl against the nape of Hannibal's neck, disturbing and tickling the hair there. "Maybe there's a way to lure him back without exposing yourself."

"He will be counting on what he knows of the Ripper to find me when next he kills."

"So what have you done lately that he might *latch* onto," Will muses, squeezing Hannibal's biceps with one hand. A slow smile creeps across Hannibal's face that he sees mirrored on Will. He kisses him and then pulls away.

"The observatory," Hannibal murmurs.

"When he revealed himself to be the Chesapeake Ripper, you showed everyone that he couldn't be; you showed *Jack* that he couldn't be. That was the first time he caught your scent. He'll have held onto it."

"He will go there to be found."

"But he won't be found by you," Will says, a curious glint overtaking his eyes. "Not if we send someone else after him in your place."

Hannibal watches Will, takes him in and luxuriates in the strange, disarming abilities of this man holding him in place like a harbor to a ship or a root to a tree. A teasing smile twitches onto Will's supple, pink mouth. The spark in his eyes shifts into something more recognizable like joy.

"What do you suggest, Will?"

"You're no stranger to imitating another person's kill."

"No," Hannibal confirms, shaking his head lightly. "Neither is Abel Gideon."

"You do it better than Gideon." Will drops his eyes and licks his lips, self-conscious. "I bet…" He combs his fingers through Hannibal's hair and swallows a dry gulp of air. Tentatively, he meets Hannibal's intent gaze. "I bet you could even talk someone else through it."

The breath catches in Hannibal's throat. He blinks at Will and clutches thoughtlessly at Will's shoulders and at his face.

"I'm real, Hannibal," Will breathes, touching Hannibal's hand on his cheek. A whisper of a laugh ghosts over Hannibal's chin. "I'm here."

"Tell me, in so many words, what you are offering."

Will breathes in and then out slowly.

"I want to kill for you; I want you to see me do it, while we have the chance." He swallows. "I want to do this; I want to give it to you."

Hannibal releases the breath he had been holding and brings Will in for a gentle kiss that builds and engulfs their easy exploration in heat and intensity.

"Do you have someone in mind," Will sighs, sounding less than invested in the reply. Hannibal leans back but doesn't get out of his lap just yet.

"A Dr. Nhan." He presses his thumb to Will's chin and watches his lips part. "We can do it tonight."

Will nods and leans forward to brush his hair against Hannibal's temple and kiss his cheekbone.

"Tonight's the night."

"Tonight's the night, Will."

He feels him shiver beneath his hands but puts no distance between them, resigned to stay here for a while longer yet.

"What would you have done with the books, Will?"

A soft, chagrined smile creeps onto Will's face.

"I was just being dramatic." He shakes his head. "I wanted to make you nervous."

"Why?"

"Because you lied," Will answers without hesitation. The shutters don't come down over his eyes for a second. "You were always going to frame me for the Copy Cat murders, even if all of this hadn't happened and we hadn't agreed to do it together."

Hannibal, to his credit, does not fidget or deny this truth.

"You needed that alias to protect yourself from me because you knew I would bring you down if you couldn't turn me."

Hannibal is more surprised to hear this admission. He says, "Yes."

"You know what I'll do to you if you ever leave me behind."

"Yes."

Will's expression softens, and he sighs, "I told you I'd do something if I caught you in another lie."

"You don't have to explain, Will."

"I do." He raises his eyes to Hannibal's. "I need you to explain to me sometimes; well, I don't *need* you to. I'd figure it out after a while with or without you."

"But you would be less angered to hear it from me."

"So we understand each other."

"I think so, yes."

"It twists in me sometimes, like a knife," Will murmurs, almost shy at his admission. "We can't waste time on it anymore."

"Wise and beautiful," Hannibal muses, no shortage of awed honesty weighing down his words.

"I've thought the same about you." Will smiles small and ducks his head. It falls slowly from his face, and he fumbles with a button on Hannibal's vest. "I really love you, you know."

Quietly, Hannibal says, "I know you do."

Will watches him for a moment, fingers idling in Hannibal's hair before falling away. "We should go before it gets too dark."

"Will."

“I know it’s hard for you to say sometimes,” Will whispers gently, mercifully. “It’s okay.”

Hannibal stands when Will taps his knee and helps Will to his feet as well. Together they round up the books strewn carelessly on the floor. Will holds onto the black leather book, tracing the golden engraved letters with his fingers. Hannibal recognizes it finally as one of Goethe’s works.

“You said the man in this story was driven mad because of love.”

“He was, in effect.”

“Would he have been saved if it had been returned; if the woman he loved reciprocated, I mean.”

“There is no way to know, Will.”

Will nods and pockets his hands, the unsatisfied look on his face of a man with questions he can’t find the language to express. Hannibal has an idea of what it is that stirs the discontent in Will and starts to casually set the books back where they go on the shelves. As if merely voicing an afterthought, Hannibal asks over his shoulder, “Do you imagine yourself as Werther, Will? Or do you think he is more like me?”

“Anytime I think something is just you or just me, it ends up being both of us.” He sits down on the couch and rests his head back against the violet cushion while Hannibal flutters about the room righting his shelves. Hannibal pauses with the second to last book, giving himself a moment to admire Will’s relaxed slouch and closed eyes. He turns back to the shelf and stocks Morse and Feshbach’s *Methods of Theoretical Physics* alongside several of his treasured papers by Hawking.

“In that case, it would seem that we are both the lovesick madman.”

“I wish that were news.”

Hannibal crosses the room with the final book, a hardcover with an armless statue depicted on the pale lavender jacket. He glances at the title and stops in his tracks to flip open to a page nearer to the front part of the book. He reads the line, *I was never one to moralize, and how could I argue ethics now? There is no excuse for wanton, random murder. But I came to understand that I didn’t need an excuse. I needed only a reason, and the terrible joy of the act was reason enough.*

“Hannibal?”

“Yes, Will,” he mumbles, looking up from the page.

“What are you reading?”

“Something from an earlier time in my life,” Hannibal hedges.

“But what is it?”

Hannibal holds up the cover, holding his place with his thumb.

"*Exquisite Corpse*," Will reads. He huffs a surprised laugh. "I didn't know you read modern horror stories."

"It appealed to me at the time."

"Somebody bought me a copy in college; it was supposed to be a joke." Will shrugs. "Hilarious."

Hannibal opens back to his spot and mumbles, "Yes."

I wanted to return to my art, to fulfill my obvious destiny. I wanted the rest of my life to do as I pleased, and I had no doubt what that would be. My hands itched for the blade, for the warmth of fresh blood, for the marble smoothness of flesh three days dead.

Will's hand runs across Hannibal's back, chin coming to rest on his shoulder.

"Sure it doesn't still appeal to you?"

"Written words can be prophetic," Hannibal replies, closing the book and tucking it away at last. "Even when they aren't meant for you."

"But especially when they could be." Will presses a kiss to Hannibal's lips and to his jaw. "Let's go, baby."

Hannibal leaves the room with him, switching off the light before walking through the kitchen to get to the basement for the necessary equipment they will need tonight. He packs a handsaw, isopropyl alcohol, and a perfectly sharpened scalpel, among other things. He hears Will washing his hands in the kitchen, the light from the upper story shining down into the basement just as it had in his dream. He shakes off the vague unease that manifests with the memory and fits his gloves on before heading up the stairs. He hands Will a new pair of gloves to wear once he's dried his hands, and they walk out into the foyer together.

Hannibal sets the duffel bag down on the floor momentarily to shrug on his coat. Will buttons up before Hannibal does, takes up the bag, and leads the way out of the house into the snow. Hannibal stands still for a moment and watches the sun where it hangs low in the pink sky with the afternoon.

Will shuts the duffel bag away in the trunk and picks the car keys out of Hannibal's pocket before walking him to the car. He boards on the passenger's side and buckles his seatbelt before relaxing into the seat.

"You know where we're going, right?"

"Catonsville," Hannibal answers easily. He rubs his hands together and Will turns up the heat.

Uncertain but unafraid, Will asks, "This is what you want, isn't it?"

“Yes.”

“You just seem…dazed, I don’t know.”

“I could never have imagined you,” Hannibal says in the way of response. He shakes his head and says, “Never.”

Will glances at him and takes his hand off the gearshift.

“Does that surprise you?”

“You always surprise me, Will.”

“I find that hard to believe,” he laughs airily. “You always seem to be two steps ahead.”

“That is my intention, of course.”

Will’s smile twists into a benign smirk. “You never told me what all you thought about Philippe.”

Philippe.

He ignores the stifling irritation building up in his chest at the name and schools his voice and his expression before speaking: “I fantasized watching you kill him and then fucking you after as he died a slow and painful death,” Hannibal says offhandedly. He adds, “This all while Jack Crawford attempted to have a serious conversation with me.”

Will stares for a moment, and Hannibal doesn’t know what he expects, but he isn’t prepared for Will’s guffaw that stretches into a very long, oxygen-consuming laugh. He doesn’t register his own smile until his cheeks start to ache slightly with the wide, wolfish grin.

“Oh, my God, you *were* jealous,” Will gasps slightly, tugging one glove off so he can rub the back of his hand across his eyes. “Do you have any idea how ridiculous that is?”

“An idea, yes.” Hannibal clears his throat, a low laugh closely trailing after.

“Poor baby,” Will coos, putting a hand in Hannibal’s hair and gently scratching his scalp, warm skin and blunt nails touching Hannibal.

“I told you it wasn’t worth discussion.”

“Not to you, maybe.” Will grins, eyes warm and open. “Common as the feeling is, jealousy on you is pretty remarkable, contrary to what you might report otherwise.” He takes his hand back, slips the glove on, and shifts the car into reverse.

Hannibal tracks their journey on his phone, and they mostly don’t speak except to exchange further details on their journey to Dr. Carson Nhan’s practice that Hannibal had located easily enough through a simple internet search. Will remains silent for the most part to listen attentively to Hannibal’s directions but speaks a few times to comment on different movements of music playing on the radio.

He is particularly moved by the theme from Scheherazade, which Hannibal concludes based on what Will doesn't say more than what little he does. He grips the wheel more tightly when the brass plays, mind working with the music to compose an impossible story that delineates the difference between one more day of life and endless nights of death.

The violin pierces through the mist of woodwinds in a flourish of chords from the harp, eventually leading itself into a silence that the soloist fills completely of resonant, almost mournful sounds tied together and ringing with vibrato at each sustained note.

The rest of the symphony fills in, and Hannibal listens but mostly keeps his eyes focused on Will. His shoulders relax at the last few measures, letting go of a breath he had held almost long enough to be uncomfortable for it.

He faces forward in his seat and consults the map on his phone every few minutes, and he doesn't ask Will why the song might appeal to him. He can estimate as to the relevance Will might ascribe to a story like that of Scheherazade, kept alive for her mind that could spin a thousand tales for a thousand and one nights to enchant a man careful with his heart and wary of the possibility for love.

No, he doesn't need to ask why the song affects Will. He really does hate when Hannibal asks him needless questions.

The sun has set when Hannibal directs Will around the block where Carson Nhan's offices are located. They wait on a side street devoid of cameras and storefronts until the sky blackens and Hannibal opens his door. He instructs Will to wait and crosses through a back alley to scan the front of Nhan's predominantly vacant premises for the presence of surveillance equipment that does not exist. He ambles around to the side of the building for the discreet patient exit and finds the door locked. He settles in amongst the shadows and waits for the handle to twitch. After a spell, it does.

Dr. Carson Nhan jogs down the steps, pulling a ring of keys out of his coat pocket as he goes. Hannibal moves to step out of the darkness when he hears another pair of footsteps.

"Excuse me, Dr. Nhan?"

What is he doing?

"Yes?"

"Oh," Will huffs exaggeratedly, clouds of warm moisture puffing from his lips. "I'm glad I caught you. My name's Freddy Lounds. I'm writing an article about Abel Gideon's escape. Do you have a minute? I know it's late."

"I'm…actually on my way home. How did you know to find me here?"

Will hums. "Inside source; can't tell." His eyes drift toward the shadows. Hannibal cocks his head to one side, hoping Will can see the motion and catalogue Hannibal's confusion. He shrugs one shoulder to jostle the weight of the duffel bag. "People often lurk in the shadows waiting for you when you get off work, doctor?"

Hannibal barely keeps the swear on his tongue from exploding out of him. He starts to step out into the light when Dr. Nhan hears him shifting about and starts to turn to look. Will drops the bag.

“Who are you—”

Will pulls his arm back and brains the man with the butt of the revolver Hannibal packs sometimes on particularly risky hunts. Dr. Nhan drops to the floor, and Will unceremoniously wipes the gun down with a handkerchief before bagging it and tossing it back into the duffel. He flips the unconscious, maybe dead, doctor over onto his back and roots around for the keys that fell beneath him. He straightens out, and Hannibal is torn between arousal and immense annoyance.

“You might have told me of your plan,” Hannibal hisses, hauling Dr. Nhan up onto his feet.

Apparently the annoyance takes precedence, at least until they’re inside. He shouldn’t worry quite so much since no one would really be able to see them from the sidewalk. The alley is dark enough that even if anyone did try to search the area for signs of human life, it would take a few seconds for them to be discovered. In that time they could dive into the blacker shadows and be entirely swallowed up in the night, perfectly obfuscated from view.

“How could I when you took off without asking for my input?” Will takes up the duffel again and pads up the steps to try the various keys in the lock. He gets it right on the third try and holds the door for Hannibal as he carries the man, alive, into the narrow hall dividing the exit from the office itself.

Will leads the way after closing the door and locking up behind them. They find themselves standing in a fairly large, modestly furnished room. Hannibal drops Nhan and hits the lights. All the drapes have been pulled helpfully closed over the windows, he notes pleasantly. Will moves to a crouch and removes the man’s coat and suit jacket before inspecting the contents Hannibal packed away for the night.

“The chair,” Will announces, unloading a rolled up tarp. He points at the red leather armchair behind the desk, an extravagant absurdity of a chair and flicks the tarp out across the free square of space in the middle of the room.

Will wraps the chair generously in plastic once Hannibal brings it over. Hannibal asks as he lugs the doctor into the protectively wrapped, expensive armchair, “Was it your intention all along to disable him with the gun, or was that a last minute decision?”

“It was the only thing heavy enough to get the job done, and I didn’t want to do it with a needle.”

“Fortunately for us, the handle of that gun is quite generic; no waffle patterns to trace back to the distributor.” Hannibal binds the man to the chair by his shoulders, neck, and feet. He tips his head back once that’s finished. He looks at Will. “Freddy Lounds?”

“What was I supposed to say? I couldn’t have crept up on the guy without spooking him.”

There is a beat of silence that befalls them wherein the next part of their night can only be segued into with an action or with words. Will chooses words.

“I don’t know where to start.”

“Paul Carruthers was exsanguinated, correct?”

“Yeah, that’s what Zeller said. Gideon drained him through an IV.” Sarcastically, he asks, “We didn’t bring a drip with us, did we?”

“You know there are other ways to bleed a person.”

Will stares at the motionless but warm, breathing body of Dr. Carson Nhan. He has more questions, but he asks none of them. A decision has been made somewhere in his lustrous, expansive mind. Will digs through the duffel again and finds the scalpel as well as the same jar Hannibal packed when they harvested Parish’s blood together in the woods. Hannibal watches with his hands clasped behind his back as Will sets the scalpel on the floor beside the duffel and the roll of duct tape Hannibal keeps in one of the side pockets.

He gathers the three items together and strolls over to the armchair to set the three items down beside the man’s feet. He rolls the sleeve of Dr. Nhan’s shirt up passed his elbow before taking up the duct tape and the scalpel again. He wraps the tape several times around Dr. Nhan’s head and cuts the end of it with the scalpel before tossing the roll back into the duffel several feet away.

Dr. Nhan stirs just over Will’s shoulder, but Will is watching Hannibal as he sinks to a kneeling position. He deftly punctures the cephalic vein at the juncture of the Humerus and the intersecting ulna and radius and follows the vein down the length of the arm to the wrist with the scalpel. He moves the jar beneath Dr. Nhan’s twitching fingers to catch the blood flow before it spills onto the tarp and drags another red line down the basilic vein just above the elbow down the point of the pisiform bone.

He repeats the action with the median cubital vein, the brachial vein, and tears open Dr. Nhan’s sleeve to get at the axillary vein higher up near the shoulder. He wears a solemn expression on his face, eyes calculating and cold.

Hannibal watches, a turbulent rapture swelling just beneath his skin, unsettled at his inactivity but also moved to a revered stillness that he can’t bear to interrupt. Will holds the man’s arm down and kneads at the flesh to encourage the veins to pump blood faster, more desperately. Dr. Nhan makes a pitiful, muffled sound from behind the duct tape and slips under before he can really begin to fight back, whether that is a result of how hard Will hit him or a natural swoon into syncope, Hannibal isn’t sure.

A bit of spittle froths from behind the shiny silver band around Nhan’s mouth and sweat begins to bead at his temples; probably syncope. He flails weakly in the chair and groans once before slipping under once more, eyes bugging out of his head even as he loses consciousness. His blood spouts onto Will’s sleeve, his gloved knuckles, and the front of his shirt. He straightens out and lets the veins continue to spill freely. He wipes the scalpel clean with a blank handkerchief from the duffel that they will burn later, as per usual. He walks

slowly across the room to stand at Hannibal's side, and together they watch the man's life gradually ebb out of him.

"Does this excite you," Will murmurs tonelessly. "Is it better when you aren't recreating someone else's kill?"

"All you've ever done is recreate the kills of others," Hannibal reminds him carefully. "Give him a moment." He gestures at the trembling, whining mass of bleeding meat. Blood drips over onto the black tarp. Hannibal's mouth curls downward at the wasteful spillage, even if it was something they had prepared for; it is a sentiment not lost on Will. "His life is like that of an American aloe." He insinuates an arm across Will's back, leeching warmth into him even as it leaves Nhan's body. "He blooms once at the end of his life, and as he blooms…" Hannibal kisses the soft, delicate flesh beneath Will's ear that feeds down into his neck. "He invites his death by way of biology."

Will sighs softly and tilts his head back but keeps his eyes trained on the shivering, waning life in the armchair in the center of the room. Blood spatters on the side of the protected armchair and up on the man's white shirt. Will moan's softly at the first suggestion of Hannibal's teeth against the jugular vein.

"How does the American aloe germinate if it only dies over and over again?"

"How do humans, Will?" Hannibal glances up from his perusal of Will's collar bone to examine the still but spasmodic body of Dr. Carson Nhan in the armchair. He mouths at that feverish skin once and buries his face in Will's hair, comforted by the familiar sweetness coming off of him in hot, toothsome waves. "How do we stay alive when all we do is die over and over again?"

"We make more," he answers dismissively, turning to take Hannibal's lips with his own. "We make too many and then we kill each other, and we continue forever."

"Death is necessary to allow for change."

"It allows life," Will says, pulling away. "It's like the sun or the air or water."

Hannibal hums and nips at Will's bottom lip. "I want you to kill Abel Gideon."

"I know," Will replies unflinchingly. "Of course you want me to kill him." He bites harder at Hannibal's upper lip. "You like it; you didn't see me kill Hobbs, so I guess this is really the first time for you, but you like it." He breathes, "Don't you?"

"Yes." Will's eyes are glazed over with something more than mere bodily lust or bloodthirsty savagery. Some component crafted of both those things and one other mysterious third essence Hannibal can't easily identify. He kisses Will's hair and inhales the snow and sweat and coffee aromas mingling in his scalp. "What are you thinking right at this moment, Will?"

"I'm thinking how much I want to go home and take you apart; rip the seams out of you until you forget how you ever did this alone." Hannibal swallows, certain that he looks every bit as wrecked and winded as Will does in this moment. He glances back to their victim, affronted

at the distraction and the obligation that comes with it. Softly but dangerously, Will says, “I’m not finished.”

“What else, gėlyte?”

“I’m thinking about staring down into the face of a cadaver I made and no one in the room being any the wiser.” He pauses to probe Hannibal’s eyes. He sighs, “That’s what you feel, isn’t it, when we stumble through a crime scene you left behind?”

“Frequently, yes.”

Will smiles, an image of pure enjoyment that Hannibal would taste on his tongue if he could tear his eyes away from it long enough to get his mouth there instead.

“Help me with his arm,” Will whispers, tugging on Hannibal’s hand where their fingers are interlocked. Hannibal goes with him and takes up the job of digging the handsaw and a pair of forceps out of the duffel while Will busies himself slicing through the material at the shoulder where the joining threads come apart immediately beneath the scalpel. Hannibal watches him systematically rip the sleeve to shreds so it comes away from the arm with a minimum of transference of blood his palms. He discards the ruined cloth and twirls the scalpel between his fingers so it catches the light on several spins.

Hannibal moves to his side with the handsaw and waits for the bleeding to slow, itching to just slit the man’s throat and get his death out of the way so they can get to work on severing the limb.

“Go ahead,” Will murmurs. “We aren’t Gideon, even if the point is to recreate what he did. There needs to be a point where we can tell that Gideon didn’t kill this man.”

Hannibal examines Will’s stoic profile and then gently plucks the scalpel out of his hand before handing off the saw in trade. He steps around the back of the armchair and pushes down his impatience to make the cut with the blade straight and consistently deep. There is some blood, annoyingly, but he’s close enough to the end that it only runs for a little while without spurting too much, though a speckle lands on Will’s cheek. The burst of color on his skin distracts Hannibal enough that he relinquishes his hold on the slippery tongue held carefully between the forceps.

Will returns his stare and draws the back of his gloved hand almost diffidently across his skin to remove the obvious traces of blood from his face. Hannibal brings his attention back to the task at hand and finishes off the Columbian necktie before setting the scalpel and forceps down to screw the lid onto the jar, mostly full but not to the point of brimming over with blood. He stands straight and addresses Will finally.

“Would you prefer him lying flat, or will this position suffice?”

“I might get the chair if he stays in it. That would be kind of tacky.”

Hannibal undoes the twine binding the man by the shoulders and legs to the piece of furniture, the plastic only mildly bloodstained. He tugs the legs a few times before the

slumped figure falls to the floor in an uncoordinated heap. He checks for a pulse with the cleaner of his gloved hands. If it's there, it's too weak to really detect. He gives Will the okay and collects the forceps, the jar, and the scalpel while Will occupies himself with brutally sawing through the middle of the Humerus.

He makes quite a mess, and Hannibal supposes he might have gone about it differently had he been alone, but to draw attention to the vicious quality of the murder might signify a nod or a threat toward Abel Gideon. Hannibal has no problem with that, even if violence of this obvious sort isn't typically what he does.

He can appreciate it, though, for what it is. He can admire and adore this aspect of Will that has come to fruition and like the American aloe, killed something even as it gave birth to something new and incredible. Hannibal watches and listens to the noisy, squelching dismemberment vaguely out of the corner of his eye. While that's going on in the background, he thoroughly disinfects the implements and the sides of the glass jar that, amazingly, stayed intact even as Will had dropped the bag to the floor. The spare sets of mismatched clothes that habitually circulate from the laundry to the duffel probably padded the fall and saved it from shattering on impact.

Hannibal can't say whether Will had planned for all of it or if he had just been steadily lucky all night long. He liked to believe Will had been that levelheaded and that thoughtful, but there is no way to definitively gauge. Will appears enthusiastic enough about sawing off the man's limb, and maybe that should set alarm bells off in Hannibal's head, but it doesn't. Instead, something else occurs to him.

He turns to assess Will as he sets the sanitized objects back into the duffel. There's a gleam there that shouldn't be; it's something that doesn't quite belong to Will but isn't exactly Hannibal's either.

He waits for Will to put the saw down before he approaches.

"Who are you, Will?"

Will looks up at him, a strange, foreign complacency hollowing out his eyes. He holds the limb out to Hannibal.

"Maybe I'm you," he murmurs, wagging the arm slightly for Hannibal to take it. The fingers jerk slightly at the motion. Hannibal takes it and rolls it up in Saran wrap before tucking it into the duffel. He comes back to remove the plastic from the armchair, balls it up neatly, and tucks it into a black garbage bag before sending the pieces of Nhan's shirt the same way. Will absentmindedly stares long and hard at the bloody serrated teeth of the saw, every few centimeters abbreviated by a meaty bit of shorn flesh. "Or maybe this is me; who I've always been."

Hannibal carries the armchair back to its place behind the desk and returns for the body. Will stands to help with moving Nhan back into the armchair and rolls up the tarp before folding it into thirds and stuffing it into the garbage bag with the rest of the trash. Hannibal cuts the duct tape away from the man's head and tosses his keys onto the desk.

“What will you do with the arm?”

“What do you think we should do with it?”

“Burn it with everything else,” Will mumbles, looking down at the spotless rug where he killed Carson Nhan. “I think we should burn it.”

“As you like, Will.”

He nods and removes his gloves before dousing his hands and his forearms in alcohol. Hannibal follows him in the action.

“That was different than I thought it would be.”

“What were you expecting?”

“Poetry, I guess,” Will mumbles, smiling shakily to himself. “A shadow suspended on dust or footsteps retreating into darkness, I don’t know.”

“Difficult to prepare for how these things will affect us.”

Will nods his head again, slowly. He checks himself for blood and finds some on his shirt. He switches it out for the pale blue plaid shirt folded in the bag. Hannibal watches him do up the buttons.

“Will you drive back?” Will’s voice is steady, and so are his hands. “I’m tired.”

“Yes, Will, of course.”

Hannibal takes up the duffel up and goes for the light switches near the exit.

“Put out the light,” Will says, eyes on Nhan’s lifeless form hunched in the armchair. The room plummets into darkness.

Hannibal finishes the line, “And then put out the light.”

They go without incident out to the car. Hannibal sets the duffel down in the trunk carefully and then slides into the driver’s seat. Will eases back into the seat, resting his head sleepily on the window. Hannibal can’t find it in himself to be disappointed at his diminished passion. He is proud of what they did tonight; he is sated enough without needing for his body to be sated, too. He leaves the radio off as they drive back into Baltimore.

If I quench thee, thou flaming minister, I can again thy former light restore.

“Did you ask Vanessa to feed the dogs, Will?”

“I’ll call her when we get to the house,” Will yawns.

“If you had rather go to bed—”

“I need a shower.” Will shakes his head. “I’ll call her. I’ll do it.”

Should I repent me: but once put out thy light, thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature, I know not where is that Promethean heat that can thy light relume.

"Is it always like that? You never answered my question." Will traces the lines in his sleeve with two fingers. "Does it feel different when you kill as the Ripper than when you kill as the Copy Cat?"

When I have plucked the rose, I cannot give it vital growth again.

"It is all death, Will; it feels no different to me regardless of whether I craft the scene myself or recreate it in another's likeness."

"You see art in it."

It must needs wither: I'll smell it on the tree.

"Sometimes," Hannibal concedes, merging into a middle lane on the freeway. "I like to leave art where there was previously only pointless flesh taking up space, but the end result differs from subject to subject."

Will produces a thoughtful noise between a grunt and another stifled yawn.

"But does it excite you, to kill?"

"The power of it does, occasionally. I find it can be cathartic in place of supplying me with a physiological high."

"You get high on it?"

"Although my brain chemistry may beg to differ, never quite in literal terms."

"But you have felt…that rush from killing?"

"Often."

"What's that like?"

"You know what it's like."

They navigate through the darkened streets to find Hannibal's driveway. Will waits for the engine to cut out.

"What was it like to kill Grutas?"

Hannibal feels his heart stutter and stop before picking up again, disrupting the easy pattern of his breath for a few short, mildly panicked seconds. He unbuckles his seatbelt.

"It was the most important, worthwhile thing I ever did. As he screamed, I felt…fear and sorrow." He goes back to that night and recalls Lady Murasaki's face the moment she disowned him. He recalls the ache it drove into his heart; how he could see before she ever

voiced it that they were nevermore to be kindred and that she would no longer be the whole world to him. Softly, he adds, “It felt like the day she died.”

Vaguely, he is aware of Will’s fingers slipping under his collar, warm and alive and comfortable.

“I felt like a child, helpless to change what the world had done to me even as I obtained all that I ever aspired to have,” he murmurs. “But I felt like a man as well, damaging the world as it had seen fit to damage me before I could ever have done anything to stop it.”

“You’ve never felt that way again?”

Hannibal turns his head to look at Will. His bones ache a little. He’s tired, too.

“Never again.”

Will watches him for a moment more before allowing Hannibal the room to lean away and open the door. He takes the key out of the ignition, and Will leaps out of the car to retrieve the duffel before Hannibal can get to it. He goes to the front door instead and sets to unlocking it. It must be only a little after eleven, but he’s exhausted. Will follows him inside and locks the door once they’re safely in the foyer with all their things intact. Will goes to the kitchen without shrugging out of his jacket and heads for the basement. Hannibal sighs and hangs up his coat, popping his back as he does so.

He is still stretching his arms up overhead when Will returns sans duffel bag to hang his jacket up.

“I can help with that, you know.”

“We are both tired, Will.” Hannibal reaches into Will’s jacket pocket and hands him his phone. “As it is, we both need a long shower and several hours of uninterrupted rest.”

Will navigates through his phone for Vanessa’s number. “Start without me. I’ll be right up.”

That Will has overcome the miasma that affected him before and now wants to share in a shower with Hannibal stirs something soothing and numbing in his chest. He presses a lazy kiss to Will’s temple and walks up the stairs, loosening his tie and undoing buttons as he climbs. Hannibal hears Will greets his neighbor on the phone as if through a dizzying haze.

He manages not to litter his clothes on the floor in a lewd trail to the bathroom only by carrying them cross the threshold and then dropping them onto the floor. He steps out of his shoes and starts the water as he unlatches his belt from his slacks and sends them and everything else into the pile with the rest of his clothes. He steps into the shower, and the water is much too hot, but he lets it beat down over his head and down his back for a few seconds before adjusting the temperature. The door opens on the other side of the glass door. He hears Will kicking off his shoes.

He makes out the shape of Will’s body straightening out to full height, more of that succulent flesh showing itself the more that his clothes come off. He watches the spectacle for a

moment and then steps back to allow Will room to stand with him under the water. Will lets out a blissful moan and tips his head back, wet hair poking out on either side when he brings his head back down again. He gives Hannibal a sated, relaxed smile.

“I thought you left,” Hannibal confesses softly, gently washing Will’s hair with his faintly scented shampoo.

“I did,” Will admits, redirecting a sudsy trail of water that attempts to fall into his eye with his fingers. There’s blood under his nails. Hannibal abandons the task of rinsing his hair to scrub at them with soap and a bristled brush.

More than a little hesitant of the answer, Hannibal asks, “And are you back?”

“For the most part, I think. I want to jump you again, so there you go.”

Hannibal snorts a laugh and shakes his head.

“I’m afraid I meant that we both need sleep.”

“But we’re naked.”

“We are, yes, and you have evidence all over your fingers. What possessed you to saw through his arm like that?”

“Nothing possessed me.” Will tugs his hand back and picks at the flecks of blood while letting Hannibal stand under the showerhead. “I wanted it to be wild. It didn’t feel…like it was me if I didn’t do it the way that I did.”

“It was too peaceful, watching him fade?”

“He should have *struggled*, or…” Will sighs, a frustrated sound. “It can’t be like that next time.”

Next time.

It can’t be like that next time.

“I wonder what sort of legacy you will carve for yourself,” Hannibal muses quietly. He takes his hand through Will’s wet hair and touches his lip with his thumb. “And if we might hunt together someday, both of us free to do what we would without any obstructions blocking us from what we desire.”

Will watches him and brings him in for a kiss, one more in a long sequence of kisses that Hannibal would never let end as long as he could help it.

“I’m really not tired anymore, Hannibal.”

He sighs, body relaxing beneath the sturdy pressure of Will’s hand smoothing across his back. His resolve wobbles.

This works both ways, Will had told him. *Damn him.*

“Wash up, Will,” Hannibal breathes, hating the hitch in his voice. “Clean the blood out from beneath your nails.” He quickly rinses off and steps out of the shower onto the bath rug.

“Hey, wait.” Will pokes his head out after him. “Where are you going?”

“The last time we tried doing that in the shower—”

“We put the mats in; it’ll be fine.” Hannibal slings a towel around his waist, and Will groans, “Hannibal.”

“Not until your hands are clean, Will.”

Will makes an impatient noise and forcefully closes the shower door. Hannibal pats himself dry and after a stalled moment, hears the scrubbing of the bristled brush and smirks to himself.

“You’ll learn to be more careful with these things,” Hannibal says over the running water. The scrubbing slows and then continues on uninterrupted. When he feels dry enough, Hannibal rubs the towel through his hair and flings it over the shower rack.

The scrubbing halts again as he walks out of the room, and Wills swears once before furiously picking it up again.

Hannibal surveys the room turns out the light before crossing to the window to pull open the curtain and let the moonlight in. He watches the night and looks down at the tree near the edge of the yard, barren with the winter. He looks down at his nude form, glowing in the moonlight.

The water stops in the bathroom, and the door shrieks open.

Hannibal turns and sits himself down on the bed, sprawling out on his back and waiting for the door outlined in white light to open and reveal his Will shaded like a silhouette floating in the brightness. He switches off the light and crawls delicately onto the bed and moves up the length of Hannibal’s body. Seeking a handhold, Hannibal takes one of his wrists and inspects the nails: spotless.

“Would you have sent me back,” Will coos, tickling Hannibal’s ear with his warm, intentional breath.

“I suppose I would have been hard pressed to.” Will chuckles softly and licks Hannibal’s earlobe. Hannibal’s fingers twitch, and he runs his hands up and down Will’s sides.

“Someday we’ll run together,” Will whispers, slipping his hands down to squeeze at Hannibal’s hips, stirring that dormant clawing in his stomach that blossoms up into his chest and throat. He sighs and presses his nose against Will’s throat, inhaling all that he can before his lungs constrict to the point of stinging behind his ribs. “We’ll chase our prey through the trees and tear the life from their bones.” Hannibal lets his head fall back with a choked groan. Will nips at his lips before parting them with his tongue.

Hannibal comes to life, gasping and reaching and tugging whatever his fingers find. He pulls on Will's hair, nails scratching roughly across his scalp. More of that feverish scent wafts up from his disturbed drying hair. Hannibal bites at his neck, forcing himself not to suck the marks into Will's skin.

"What do you want? Tell me what you want; I'll give it to you. You have everything," Will sighs, pressing his body down against Hannibal's and clutching at his shoulders. "How do you want me?"

"Like this, Will." Hannibal bites back his moan and rolls his hips up into Will's, holding him closely as he does. Will mewls, one of Hannibal's favorite sounds, and drops his forehead onto Hannibal's clavicle. He forces a hand between them and Hannibal slides his down right beside Will's. They hold and move together, panting hotly into each other's mouths and kissing haphazardly whenever they don't strictly require oxygen. Will's hand around him is warm and constant and gorgeous.

He makes a high noise that gets caught in the back of his throat and he rolls off of Hannibal onto the other side of the bed. He says, "Come here," and Hannibal does.

He fumbles in the drawer beside the bed for lubricant and a condom, handing the former of the two objects off and working the condom on over Hannibal's cock. He sucks in a breath at the feel of Will's fingers everywhere they shock him with the smallest amount of friction. He bites his lip and uncaps the small bottle in his hands, trembling slightly as he winds his arm beneath Will's body, warmth encasing him all over and befuddling his headspace.

He sits up with Will as he opens him up slowly, carefully, though he is loose enough already to take one finger easily.

He manages to ask, "Were you…?"

"Yeah," Will pants, nuzzling Hannibal's cheek with his nose like a big cat and nearly purring like one. "I wanted…" He drops his head and moves up slightly to nose at Hannibal's throat. "I wanted this to be easy. *Oh,* God."

"You're ready, Will."

"I'm—what?" Will blinks up at him, shaking and sweating through the opening pangs of his pleasure. Hannibal twists his fingers and presses his third finger in, meeting only a little bit of resistance as he goes. Will shudders and clutches at Hannibal's shoulders, biting hard at the cartilage of his ear and mouthing at his hairline.

"You always were." Will's eyebrows furrow down once, and then his eyes widen slightly, his forehead smooth again, freed of the question. "There was never going to be anyone but you." He touches on the bundle of nerves there in Will's body and delights in the quaking ecstasy blanketing him in the form of a hot, writhing body neither bleeding nor broken but coming apart beneath his hands all the same. He removes his fingers slowly, and Will moans, the sound licentious, steady, and unchecked.

He places his hands on Will's hips and lets Will move up on his knees before lowering down carefully and guiding Hannibal into him. Will doesn't stop until he's seated in Hannibal's lap, knees quivering on either side of Hannibal's body. He runs his hands down his thighs and soothes the muscles straining to hold him aloft. They give, and Will sinks down with the last of his weight and the weight of gravity, grunting and fisting a hand in Hannibal's hair. They breathe around each other, and it's different; the heat and pull of Will's body are the same, but some key element is different.

They start to move, Hannibal bouncing Will at every press upward and Will jostling Hannibal at every downward press. He keeps Hannibal there with his hands and shifts from his knees to his feet for better ease of movement. His grip tightens on Hannibal's shoulder, one hand creeping behind him to tangle in the blanket and provide him with better leverage.

Will never looks away from him. His eyelids flutter a few times, but he never bereaves Hannibal of his focused intensity. His eyes have changed; a subtle change but a change nonetheless.

Hannibal combs his fingers through Will's hair and holds him close, studying that change, picking it apart for all the pieces that make it up. Will smiles and presses their foreheads together. He grits out, "Do you like what you see, Hannibal?"

"Where did you go," Hannibal sighs, burying his face in Will's neck before he can draw enough breath to finish his sentence. "When I asked who you were," he groans and nips at Will's lip, at his jaw, at his neck.

"I was trying to relive it as someone else." Will tips his head back and moans, scratching Hannibal's shoulder as he clenches his hand into a fist. "I was trying not to feel it so I would —so I could…harder, harder," he whispers, biting and sucking at the skin available to him. "Oh, I was in my head. I wanted to be with you."

"You're with me now, Will," Hannibal gasps, bucking up faster into the sweltering heat of Will's body. His veins hum with the energy as it passes through their bodies and exists within their skin. He touches Will's cock and pumps him a few times. "You will always be with me; even when we are a million miles apart, you will be with me."

"Yes, always." Will nods his head frantically, throwing off their rhythm as he moves with Hannibal's hand. He mumbles, "Always with you, forever, Hannibal."

"And when you kill Abel Gideon…" Will gasps and tears his hand away from the bed to cling to Hannibal's shoulders, the precipice clearly within view now. "When you kill him, you will remember this moment, right on the edge of shattering, right on the brink…of an unmatchable…bliss. This moment, Will," Hannibal whispers against Will's lips as they fall open to allow a splendorous keen to pass through them. He closes his eyes and follows after; his fingers close around Will's hip like a vise, a low groan tumbling out from his diaphragm.

Will whimpers softly and lazily kisses the point of Hannibal's cheekbone. Hannibal feels his tongue swipe across his skin as Will licks his lips and sighs.

"I'll set Gideon straight," he whispers, voice shot and scratching against his throat.

“Thank you, baby.”

Will smiles and bumps his forehead against Hannibal’s. He mumbles, “That’s my line.”

“It’s grown on me.”

“It has, hasn’t it?” Will’s eyes soften, and he becomes a man Hannibal recognizes once more. “Good.”

Hannibal presses his nose into Will’s hair and smiles.

“Yes, I think so, too.”

Will grumbles something and after a moment, heaves himself out of Hannibal’s lap and onto his back. He lays flat and takes several easy breaths in and out before acknowledging the mess on his chest and stomach. He slips carefully off the bed and heads to the bathroom for a few moments before re-emerging predominantly unsullied. Hannibal disposes of the condom and lays back, waiting with one arm stretched out for Will when he crawls back into bed, limbs loose and rubbery and pliant. Hannibal kisses his forehead, and Will relaxes, rubbing a warm cheek over Hannibal’s even heartbeat.

“When Gideon’s out of the way, we need to go to Abigail.”

“We will,” Hannibal assures him, gently squeezing his shoulder.

They sink into a lush silence, swathed in moonlight and a blurred peace that seduces the edges of Hannibal’s consciousness. He starts to slide under when Will’s voice brings him back.

“I know you were tired,” he whispers, voice barely audible. He looks up to see if Hannibal heard him. Hannibal squints down at him, awake but not necessarily alert, and Will settles back over Hannibal’s sternum. He adds, a bit louder but not by much, “I want as many nights with you in this bed as we have left.”

The sleep fizzles out of Hannibal’s brain. His body aches still, but the unrest in Will’s statement draws him out of the comfortable lull the chemicals in his brain still attempt to push on him.

He brings his other arm across his stomach to find Will’s wrist and then his hand. Their fingers lace together.

Will presses a soft kiss to Hannibal’s skin and murmurs, “Don’t tell me how little is left, don’t.” He squeezes Hannibal’s fingers and blinks a few times, eyelashes leaving wet scuffs on his chest before they stay decisively closed.

“Good night, Will.”

“Good night, Hannibal.”

“I love you.”

Will answers, voice strangled in his throat, “I know.”

He feels one tear and then another break beneath Will’s cheek, and then there is silence. He watches the ceiling for hours, tears of his own sliding down his cheeks to his ears and pillow.

He watches the ceiling a while longer, and the sun rises, and his tears have dried, but the tightness in his chest remains.

Will has moved in his sleep to Hannibal’s shoulder, the warm puffs of his breath a soothing metronome to reset the beat of his heart to as he watches the morning sun change the tint of the light cast over the snow from deep oxblood to a pale indigo to a cornflower blue to the citrus orange of a grapefruit rind and eventually to the shimmering white of a pristine seashell.

Hannibal draws just his fingertips through Will’s dark hair, some of the curls twisting around his knuckles.

He lays his head back and watches the orange sunlight filter into the room from the unveiled window. He watches the light traverse first his feet and ankles and then his legs and Will’s leg hooked around one of Hannibal’s shins.

He waits, but Will continues dreaming, a soft smile curving the edges of his beautiful, sleeping mouth.

Waiting will be the easiest and the hardest part of what comes next, but he can weather this waiting. Will is in his arms and at peace, and he can wait, even as he wishes this moment would stay with him; that this happiness, tinged as it is with a heady, stabbing pain right at the core of him, could last.

He watches Will and waits, and he tries to remind himself that he has waited before and that waiting, like sowing, brings an abundant harvest.

Chapter End Notes

Die Leiden des jungen Werthers by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Methods of Theoretical Physics by Morse and Feshbach

Exquisite Corpse by Poppy Z. Brite

Othello (V, ii, 7-15) by Billy Shakespeare

Freddy Lounds (–y, not –ie) is a reference to Harris' original male character in *Red Dragon*. It’s not a typo.

The quote from the summary is from Bryan Fuller's NBC Hannibal. It seemed appropriate.

Crossroads

Chapter Summary

Promises are fulfilled.

Chapter Notes

Well, I woke up this morning/Got the crossroads on my mind/Take a walk with me/And everything will work out fine/Well, I woke up this morning/Got the judgment on my mind

I'll be thine, my fair,
Or not my father's; for I cannot be
Mine own, nor any thing to any, if
I be not thine. To this I am most constant,
Though destiny say no.
The Winter's Tale, (IV.4.42-46)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Whose heart, Cora signs, a funny little knit in between her fair eyebrows.

Abigail stares down at the old poem she scribbled down anew on the otherwise clean page of her journal. Cora asks her to read her what she writes sometimes, a keen interest on the more poetic ramblings summoned from half-remembered dreams and whispers of nightmares.

She had forgotten she took it down a second time. Its original had been lost to the trash in her first journal. It had been lost when Nadine tarnished it with that same offensive word she had used to instigate violence with Cora, but Abigail had rewritten it and saved it from obscurity.

Ambrosial muscle
Bleeds red life and promises
We will honor him

They are sitting outside in the courtyard on one of the many vacant benches. Abigail wears a jacket and a pretty white scarf Hannibal gave her at the first turn from fall to winter. She tugs it more tightly around her neck and watches the clear blue sky. It could be any of those gradient blues from the painting in Dr. Bloom's office, a hue higher up towards heaven than those darker shades just above the horizon fabricated by the sea.

"It was about a dream I had," she answers distractedly. "A long time ago."

Cora spells out five inquisitive letters that make up the name of the boy she killed.

Her chest and throat constrict. She swallows.

"No."

Then Will.

It's somehow far worse that Cora guesses him at all; never mind that she's right. Abigail can't form words with so little breath available to her lungs, so she merely nods. Cora doesn't ask anything more; she has no more questions about it, or she would. As long as Abigail has known her, she has never been afraid of asking anyone whatever it is she is curious or concerned about. Abigail does appreciate the irony of an articulate and loquacious mute, though she's alone in that regard.

Cora, decidedly ignoring Abigail out of a polite sense of decency, looks out at the snow with a morose, contemplative expression on her face. She is obviously considering something, though Cora always has that look on her face; as bubbly as Abigail's observed her to be, something very near to a scowl permanently rests on her small, pink mouth. She catches Abigail watching her and smiles, and there she is again, the Cora Abigail believes in over the perpetual caricature of herself she projects to the staff.

They sit for a while in companionable silence before Cora takes to humming the way she does. Abigail flips to a clean page and hands Cora the pen she smuggled out of her room just for this purpose. Cora leans her shoulder back slightly so Abigail can see the words she puts down to paper. This shared activity is something they have taken to since Dr. Bloom gifted Abigail with this second journal.

It is an easier mode of communication between them, especially when Abigail grows frustrated with not being able to understand the more complex signs that she hasn't learned yet. Cora doesn't get upset, of course. The woman has infinite patience at her leisure. She is wary of written correspondence as it leaves a physical trail behind them, but the little evidence they create together stays in the journal, and at least it will burn neatly if they need to rid themselves of it.

Cora writes a few lines on the clean left hand page in what looks like Latin. She goes down the page writing phrases that Abigail doesn't recognize and breaks them up in stanzas: lyrics

to the song she currently hums.

While she goes down the page in the language that she will eventually translate on the opposite page, Abigail observes. She is wearing a black, lived-in leather jacket and a generic, gray beanie that conceals much of her blonde hair except the strands securely protecting the back of her neck. Beneath the jacket, which looks quite expensive even if it is old, is a faded purple hoodie that brings out her soft green eyes. Her jeans are too big for her; probably, her mother sends her these clothes every once in a while based on what she can estimate with her eyes each time she visits. It would explain the leather jacket, too, though Abigail suspects it's so big because it belonged to someone else before it came into Cora's possession.

Cora moves over to the right hand page and begins again in English, calling to Abigail's mind something Nadine had said to her once back when they first spoke to each other in what may have been the late summer or early fall. She looks down at the neatly printed words. Nadine had told her Cora used to sing in Italian, German, and French. Nadine had told her Cora could sing so beautifully.

She reads over Cora's left shoulder and keeps her warring thoughts to herself. If Abigail interrupts her, she might stop and leave her translation unfinished.

And thinking of her
Sweet sleep overcame me

I am your master
See your heart
And of this burning heart
Your heart

She trembling,
Obediently eats
Weeping, I saw him then depart from me

They had killed Will in her dream that way, by eating his heart. She had killed Nadine that way with Hannibal in a separate dream. Abigail looks away, firmly comprehending the reason behind this particular song selection. She admires the instant connection Cora made to it after listening to Abigail read a fragment of her dream.

She continues to hum at Abigail's side, unbothered and unconcerned with whatever reaction she might have to the words on the page. Abigail hears in the consistent tone of her voice, muffled as it is by the friction of skin and muscles, that Cora does have the ability for song and an impressive range paired with it at that. Her register dips down low and then higher into a semblance of a falsetto.

It occurs to her that Hannibal would probably enjoy that talent in another person. She knows Will would enjoy it, too, because beauty, by its very definition, appeals to all who witness it,

but Hannibal appreciates beauty and appreciates it in a way that not many people consciously appreciate anything. She had taken stock of this attribute of his the few occasions she had gotten to dine with him in his home. The art and the food aside, Hannibal dressed and carried himself in the manner of a man deeply invested in the finer bounties that could be collected of life.

Cora gently nudges her ribs and hands her the small journal with the completed lyrics to the song. Abigail skims through the lines she read already to the end.

Joy is converted
To the bitterest tears

I am in peace
My heart
I am in peace
See my heart

When she manages to tear her gaze away from the words, she feels a foreign pair of eyes on her. She glances around but finds no one looking even vaguely in her general direction. Cora signs, *Okay?*

"Yeah," she mumbles uneasily, whipping around again and peering along the top of the wall just for good measure. There isn't anyone watching, but she feels unsettled and lost to the wind, or like she will be in just a matter of time. She shrugs it off, reasoning that she may just be anxious to see Will and Hannibal later when they come for her. Will had set the date for today after much haggling and two dead serial killers; three, if she counted her dad. It may be overzealous to take their arrangement back to that day, but then, maybe not. Everything did begin there, after all.

Why did you eat his heart, Cora signs, as per her sometimes oblivious curiosity. *In your dream, what happened?*

Abigail smiles, a lighter feeling floating into her chest. She asks, "Are you going to interpret it?"

Cora huffs a single chuckle, teeth bared easily in an open smile. She shakes her head. With her hair pulled away from her face it is a smaller gesture than usual. Cora often reminds Abigail of a horse when she shakes her head that way, all long blonde hair that needs trimming and a slightly raised chin. Cora is as quietly proud and modestly defiant as a domesticated horse; she is likewise every bit as feral and torrential as an unbroken one.

How is a more interesting question.

Abigail waits, clenching her fingers into nervous fists. Cora's expression is merciful, kind.

With whom would be my follow-up.

"He gave it to us."

To you and Dr. Lecter?

Abigail marvels briefly at the speed with which she can read Cora's spelled letters when she knew nothing of the language to start with. Cora lights up a bit, too, but then, she does that every time Abigail guesses right at something she says or does. She is so used to silence that effective communication with another person still surprises and delights her. The thought saddens Abigail as Cora has so much to say and so many ways to say it.

You both ate it?

"Hannibal let me first and then I…Yeah." She nods, monitoring her expression carefully. The dream has long since ceased in its ability to frighten her. Anymore all she feels toward those vivid images is a stunned kind of reverence.

She doesn't doubt—she has not ever doubted—its symbolism or the truth behind it.

You're confident in his allegiance to you, Cora signs with a secretive smile on her face.

"Will keeps my secrets."

I meant Dr. Lecter.

"Oh, well, yes." Abigail closes the journal and bounces her legs a few times, chilled through with the cold. She would like to go back inside, but Will and Hannibal will be by soon, and she'd rather stay with Cora until they come for her. The time it would take them to get resettled is time taken away from this carefree afternoon they're having, and something about it feels passing and precious; it feels unsecured, like an oath given halfway out of deceit.

You're nervous, Cora states definitively. *Why?*

"There's something they need to talk to me about. It's…important, but I don't know what it is yet, and it can't—I mean, it can't be good or they would just tell me."

A slight frown mars Cora's mouth, and she purses her lips together. Abigail waits for her to gather her thoughts and then watches as the words form. Cora holds one hand at level with her chin and the other with her sternum, clenches them into fists, and then spells out the word *trust* with her left hand.

Abigail lets that sink in for a moment. Of course she trusts them, and of course she'll need to just to get through today. They haven't turned her in, and they won't. They're going to do whatever is in their power to protect her, and she believes in that promise, believes in them, more firmly than she's been able to believe in anything since her father killed for the first time. The kind of trust she has in them doesn't fit into a category clearly defined by dependence or faith individually; it is some painful, hybrid mixture of the two.

She nods anyway. The answer, barring the auxiliary emotions tied to it, is yes. Yes, she trusts them implicitly.

Then it'll be okay. Cora smiles reassuringly, the reassurance expressed more in her eyes than in the slight upward curve to her lips. *They'll know what to do with whatever it is that's wrong.*

Something curious and sharp glints in Cora's eyes, an intent shift in her gaze like a significant thought is trying to make itself be realized. Abigail squeezes the edges of the journal in hers hands, cold and sweating but steady.

"Did Anson ever…kill anyone for you? I mean, apart from himself."

If she is taken aback by the question she doesn't show it. Cora never cries anymore when Anson is briefly mentioned in conversation. She only ever reacts aversely when Noah's likeness to his father comes into question or when asked about her separation from either of them, though Abigail surmises from the information she has gathered that she misses Anson a great deal more than Noah. She would never say that out loud, Abigail is certain, but she actually knew Anson once and loved him whereas Noah is something of a stranger or a distant idea only seldom grasped.

Do you mean another person?

"Did he?"

There were…animals in Devil's Den. She looks down and then up at the aquamarine sky. Her jaw clenches and then relaxes. She says, *But once there was a hiker that found us.*

Nadine had spoken of a horse, a beast they'd slain in the night and whose blood they had washed themselves in but never of a person, hiker or otherwise. Abigail had pictured it countless times before; a tall, dark-haired Anson Huxley chasing after Cora through the woods at night, each of them decorated haphazardly in leaves, dirt, and blood. She imagined Cora younger and screaming eloquent words in all those languages Nadine said she knew before her tongue was taken from her.

Cora bites her lip and searches the cloudless sky as if for the answer. She shakes her head lightly, anticipating the question.

"They were going to tell."

I told him not to. We had been only gone two weeks; it was our third time in Devil's Den.

She falters, teeth gnawing into her lip still. She raises her hands and then sets them down again. Abigail waits, but she doesn't lift them again. She decides to inquire about something else and leave that sensitive topic for later.

"You stayed in a motel most of the time?"

Different motels every few days, she answers easily without hesitation. *He was still trying to get me used to the idea of…being away. I had never been really separated from my mother*

before he took me out of this place. She used to visit me every weekend.

"How did he do that, get you as far as Connecticut?"

He was determined. Cora slumps her shoulders into a more comfortable slouch and hums fondly. *I only had to get into town, and he took care of the rest. I trusted him with that.*

"What do you mean you only had to get into town?"

Cora looks at her. *You know we can't just leave. Someone needs to sign us out.*

"So, who did you get, your mom?"

She drops her eyes guiltily before shifting her glance toward the door back into the building and signing the five letters of Diane's name.

"Oh," Abigail breathes. "Oh."

Instantly memories flash through her mind of Diane hovering possessively, or protectively, over Cora; of Diane keeping everyone away from Cora; of Diane's bitter resentment and general distrust of the patients; of the scornful eye with which she looks down on Cora or completely ignores her when she can't interfere.

She recalls the way Diane grabbed her arm too tightly when she thought Abigail had upset Cora. Diane had screamed at Cora and Abigail both after the confrontation with Nadine. There had been tears in her eyes, and Abigail had credited them to her blustery rage, but no, that hadn't been right at all. Cora avoids her eyes, and she does look very guilty.

She was younger then; we both were.

"Not young enough to forgive," Abigail murmurs, glancing over her shoulder at the door again. "Why were you here, those two years before Anson?"

Early on-set dysthymia. She rolls her eyes. *My mother thought I was a danger to myself. My grandfather convinced her that this place would be good for me. Trust a doctor to think that way.*

"Hannibal would never have done that to you."

You're here, aren't you?

Abigail stares at a loss, and Cora backs down, realizing her error.

Bottled up anger; I'm sorry.

"He wasn't the only one who had to make that decision," Abigail says quietly. In the way of elaborating further, she continues, "My dad did horrible things. Keeping me here is just a way for the police to make sure I don't go anywhere until they can prove I'm just as bad as he was. They'll never let me go."

I used to think that, too. Cora's eyebrows twitch toward her hairline once. *No one will ever believe I didn't go with Anson willingly and do all those things that he did of my own volition.*

"But you did," Abigail teases gently with a soft smile.

So did you. Cora tilts her head to one side. Abigail tries to summon up some shred of fear, but there is none bubbling up inside her. It isn't an accusation or a hex; it is what it is. It is the truth, and both of them here are exposed. She can't be afraid of Cora, not when they're both stripped bare of their lies and left raw and sinewy to the other's truth and vulnerability.

Cora signs, *We're monsters, both of us.*

Abigail smiles, resigned to the truth she's fought all this time since her first doppelgänger fell dead by her father's hands. More than that, she feels emboldened by that truth. She is dangerous. She is a weapon and a survivor. She is monstrous, and there is strength to be had there.

"At least there's strength in numbers."

The door to the facility clicks quietly open, and Will is standing there in the doorway looking rumpled and tired but determined.

Trudy is walking toward them, helpful as ever, and the notebook along with the pen slide out of Abigail's lap and inside Cora's jacket. She gives Abigail a brief, blank expression that Abigail doesn't know how to interpret. There's no time to ask, so she leaves it be.

"Tall, dark, and handsome for one Abigail Hobbs," Trudy announces teasingly. Her voice is too soft for Will to hear, and Abigail suspects that was the point. Cora stifles a laugh and stands with Abigail. Trudy wanders off to speak to Evander on the other side of the garden. He stands out, stark white coat and thick snow blanketing the ground greatly contrasting with his dark skin.

"Hi," he greets her, awkwardly enough that she thinks maybe he heard Trudy after all. "Oh, is this Cora?"

He extends his hand and Cora takes it, beaming a little. Abigail has told her a lot about Will, about what he can do and about what he's done for her. She has wanted to meet Will because she has met Hannibal and she knows they are an item. It's as Cora hums a short but cheerful note of acknowledgment that she realizes they have very little secrets left from each other anymore.

"Your eye looks better; that's good."

She smiles and stuffs her hands into her jacket pockets, clearly embarrassed.

"Abigail told me what happened. Hannibal explained why it did." He shrugs, matching Cora on par for embarrassment but ever focused on getting the words out. "It was brave of you to do that. Thank you for looking after her."

She starts to sign, *She's the one—* and stops abruptly.

Will, not to be outdone by Hannibal in his ability to constantly surprise Abigail, lifts his hands and asks, effortlessly, *She's the one who what?*

Cora's mouth drops open, which Abigail suspects is an exact mirror image of her own expression. The shock only lasts a moment, but that one moment is long enough for Will to bask in its glory for a while longer. A smile flickers onto Cora's face, and she signs the rest of her statement, almost too quickly for Abigail to register what she's saying.

She's the one who's been looking after me.

Will smiles; it makes him look proud. He should always look like that.

"You look out for your friends." Will nods, and Cora assesses him in that open, childlike way that she does. After a moment, she nods, too.

We protect them when we can.

He swallows, glances at Abigail, and then back to Cora. With a strange inflection to his words, he concedes, "That's the plan."

"Do we need to go now?" She knows the answer, knows there's no way around it if there ever was.

"I wanted to talk first, and then we'll go. Maybe we should go inside?"

"Okay. Are you going to stay out here, Cora?"

She knocks with her left hand to signal yes and extends her right to Will again. He takes it with a sturdy, brilliant smile and catches her eyes once before letting go. Cora glances pointedly at Abigail and taps two fingers over her ribs where the journal has been tucked away. She wants her to retrieve it before they leave.

Abigail nods once to show that she understands and turns to go inside with Will. She looks once over her shoulder to see Cora removing the journal from her pocket and flipping to a clean page.

It's much warmer inside, so she sheds her coat in the main atrium. Will keeps his but takes it off once they get into one of the reading rooms where Freddie Lounds once interviewed her while they were working on the book. In hindsight, she supposes the ambitious reporter only wanted a front row seat once everything went bad the way she had undoubtedly expected it would from the start.

Will sits her down, precariously in earshot of other patients and staff members, and stares for a while out the window.

"She cares a lot about you."

"I think so." Abigail rubs her hands together and tugs her knitted sleeves down over her knuckles. Finding that she has it in her to be playful, she asks, "Was there anything else you picked up while we were down there?"

He flashes a sad smile and says, “She was all alone before you came along.”

Abigail doesn’t miss a beat.

“Like you were before Hannibal?”

His eyes shine, and she tracks the movement of an unnamable expression across his face. It progresses slowly and quickly at the same time, making her doubt that she saw it at all, but then he speaks and she knows she must have.

“And like he was before me.”

Her smile matches his for pain and for the glimmer of hope it holds. He sighs and leans forward where he’s sitting on the quaint wooden chair opposite hers. She relaxes slightly but can’t make herself let go completely. She’s still unsettled, though actually seeing Will and being with him has made her feel heaps better.

Quietly, so that she nearly misses it, he says, “I want to take you away from here.”

“Is that part of the plan,” she rephrases his words. He doesn’t break eye contact when she speaks to him or when he speaks to her. It feels new looking at him the way that he is at present; he seems different, like a man possessed but with calm rather than demons. Will has always had demons as all men do; peace in him paints a more wild picture than does mania or panic. She blinks, and the image of Cora’s scratchy rendition of the song in both Latin and English floats at the forefront of her mind.

I am in peace. See my heart.

Her dad had said that before he died, maybe. It was difficult to hear anything over the ringing in her ears or the blood rushing out of her body, but she had been watching him as he watched Will in those final moments. He had said something to that effect, something like *see.*

“You see everything, don’t you?”

He searches her eyes carefully but leisurely. He is placid, unafraid. Nothing in her eyes frightens him. Nothing she could ever do would frighten him anymore.

“It doesn’t exactly work like that.” He takes her hand in his and studies it. His eyes are delicate and purposeful like an artist appraising the work of a compatriot perfectly in league with him. “There’s always a blurry spot; always something waiting to be missed, overlooked.” His eyes dart back up to hers.

“What do you need to talk to me about, Will?” She looks around, nerves picking up. “Where’s Hannibal?”

“He’s waiting to meet us.”

“At home?”

“In a sense,” he says slowly. He squeezes her hand gently and releases her, but she hangs on. With some reluctance, he clarifies, “He’s in Minnesota.”

Cautious of other ears in the room and wary of the rapidly beating heart in her chest, she asks, “Why is he in Minnesota?”

“It’s where everything started.”

Bordering on exasperation, she whispers, “Exactly, so why go back there?”

“Endings are just beginnings,” he states tonelessly with a mild shake of his head. “That’s where we end the witch hunt. That’s where your trail goes cold.”

She sucks in a quick gasp of air. “How are you going to make it go cold?”

He catches her eye again, and his face is warmer than it was before. There is a hint of regret and something like fear there in the furrow of his eyebrows, but the lines around his mouth are relaxed. His posture is relaxed, and his hands are warm and dry and steady.

“Have you ever lost a deer’s trail?”

Abigail blinks. It happened once or twice, especially if the animal fled and there had been rain that day or the night before. No tracks meant there was no trail, and the absence of dry underbrush crushed underfoot meant only wind and the rustle of hunting gear in the chill autumn air to show for the lost game. He takes her silence for the answer that it is.

“Sometimes you just nick it with the bullet, and even if you follow the blood long enough, you never find it.” He glances out the window briefly. “Sometimes they’re dead when you get to them, and sometimes they only survive long enough for you to catch up and finish the job. By that point it’s a mercy to kill them.” Will returns his gaze to her. “But every once in a while, the shot is perfect, or lousy, depending on how you look at it, and the animal lives and *can live* if it isn’t left to die.”

“You want to take me back to Minnesota,” Abigail says slowly, absorbing. “Where my dad killed my mom and tried to kill me, and you want my trail to end there.”

“If you stay here, Abigail, Jack will put you in chains. You will never be free so long as he knows to look for you. This saves you.”

“What about you and Hannibal?” Her voice shakes. “What will you do? You’ll be left to clean up the mess. What are you even going to do to me? What if it doesn’t work and Jack still comes after me?”

He touches her face, and in the back of her mind she recognizes the hissing waves in her ear as Will gently hushing her. A few people are watching them, but as no one moves to break them apart she figures they are safe for the most part. Will doesn’t appear quite as convinced.

“We’ve gotta go, baby.”

“Okay,” she whispers hoarsely.

“You should say goodbye to Cora.”

“Okay.”

“I’m going to wait for you downstairs. Take whatever time you need.”

He goes without saying anything more, and she stares complacently out the glaringly white windows. Not wanting to draw attention to herself she heads back down to the atrium and takes her coat off the rack. She shrugs back into it and observes Will taking a thick book off the shelf in the lobby and curiously skimming through it. Abigail breathes deeply in and out a few times and then walks back outside. Cora is sitting precisely where she left her with her hands in her pockets and the journal out of sight. She has taken off the beanie and has stuffed it in her pocket. Her hair whips gently about it the wind long and soft and lovely.

Abigail sits down beside her, willing away the tears that threaten to give her away. She refuses to cry now. Will and Hannibal need her to be strong; Cora needs her to be strong, too, though she may not ever know it.

Okay?

Abigail makes the knocking sign for yes with her right hand. Cora smiles and slips her hand inside her jacket to procure the small, deep blue journal.

“What did you write?”

Secrets, Cora signs, staring off over the wall not unhappily.

Without looking, Abigail tucks it into a secure pocket on the inside of her coat and buttons up. She stares over the wall with Cora and imagines a young, unthinking man stealing glances over the wall and getting it in his head that he would steal Cora and make her his. She imagines Hannibal and Will stealing glances before they were what they are and setting their sights on eternity like all naïve, vibrant lovers do.

She imagines her father thinking all those false positives could ever substitute for the real thing, the *Golden Ticket.* She imagines herself praying that Nick Boyle’s death could grant her permanent salvation.

Abigail turns to see Cora signing something: *the hiker.*

She angles her head slightly to the journal and doesn’t bring her eyes away from the wall. Abigail thinks her eyes might glisten, but it’s impossible to really tell in profile and with the way the cold breeze bites and saps the moisture from the air.

She signs, a grave twin of her previously lighthearted declaration, *We’re monsters, both of us.*

“We chased after monsters.” Abigail shrugs, tears full-on welling in her eyes now regardless of her own internal berating. “What else could really have been expected of us?”

Cora chased a madman, and Abigail chased her father. Will chased Hannibal, and Hannibal chased Will.

Monsters, she thinks. *That's all.*

"Goodbye, Cora."

Goodbye, Abigail. She takes time to spell her full name out slowly to draw out this moment even as it passes them by. She grieves to think that time is like that; unflinching and unyielding like the acceleration and incorruptible pull of gravity on an object cast out and left to mass and inertia and mathematics; like a fallen, shattered teacup lost to physics or the hollowed shell of a walnut carelessly discarded from a tree. Cora signs, *They'll never let you go.*

She adds, sighing, *The mad ones never do.*

Cora looks upon Abigail at last, lips upturned at one side in an inverted, desolate frown. One tear slips through her defenses, and when she brings a hand up to Abigail's face she is alerted to the very many that have slipped through her own and stained her cheeks with warm, salty tears. She sees through an increasingly blurred screen of tears that Cora signs, *If you get the chance, if you ever get the chance…*

She swallows once, and then with a mutilated tongue and lips chapped with the cold and one side of her face streaked through down to her chin with a single tear, she speaks. She speaks with that voice that is no stranger to music or to language or to love or to anguish.

She says, "Be happy."

Abigail's arms shoot out around Cora's shoulders, and she pulls the smaller body in toward hers for a thorough, warm embrace. Cora doesn't flinch or shy away. She merely accepts and gives back, well-versed and deceptively familiar with this freely given and evenly reciprocated intimacy.

They release each other, and it is the end, but it's also the beginning. Cora will have Hannibal, Abigail hopes, to get her out of this place someday and back to her son. Failing that, there would be Will, and he just might smuggle Cora out, too, if he felt up to the challenge. It certainly hadn't sounded all that difficult for Anson Huxley to get the job done. Whatever the effects of the aftermath were, there would be someone left to take care of Cora, be it Will or Hannibal; be it Trudy or Diane; Dr. Bloom or Dr. Pearce.

Abigail peers into those lucid green eyes for what may very well be the last time and tries to stow the flecks of hazel in the green away in her memory.

She smiles one last time and then stands and turns to leave, unable to bear it any longer. Without looking back Abigail goes through the door to the building, barrels inelegantly through the lobby, and briefly clocks Will's hand on her shoulder as she goes right out the front door and onto the sidewalk. She makes a beeline for Will's car and just about screams when she catches sight of the fiery wisp of hair at the edge of the parking lot. She forces herself to act natural, and they make it in time without drawing attention to themselves. Will waits until the door to the building swings closed behind her to start the car.

“I cannot believe this is my life,” he mutters, turning into traffic and making for the freeway. “Strange days.”

“What did you think you’d be doing now when you were a kid?”

He laughs dryly. With some disbelief, he confesses, “For a while I thought I was going to be an astronaut.”

She smiles at the thought of him up in space where gravity could never touch him. Will Graham should always be proud, he should always be calm, and he should always be free of the incongruous, soul-crushing weight of the world and its many evils. The image solidifies in her mind, and she thinks of Atlas holding the earth on his shoulders and made to suffer indefinitely.

He changes lanes when the sign for the airport comes up and continues, “I decided early on that police work was going to be my thing, though I thought it would be more sleuthing and espionage than paperwork and stakeouts.”

Abigail hums. “And then you killed my dad.”

“Yes,” he admits softly. “Everything changed after that.”

“Do you think killing someone has to change you?”

“I think it’s supposed to,” he hedges, sighing. “And I think it will if you let it, but the question is how.”

“How did it change you?”

He glances her way momentarily, smiling weakly. “Are you asking if I’m all here because that’s what it sounds like you’re asking.”

“I know you’re here,” she assures him. Her hand twitches to reach out for him. They drive off the exit ramp and into a bustling section of town. He brings the car into the airport’s parking lot and kills the engine. Her hand rests on his wrist as he’s undoing his seatbelt. He watches her for a moment and then settles into the seat before turning his gaze out to the front of the windshield.

He says, “At first I was terrified.” Cold fear drops in her stomach, but she waits. He continues, conversationally, “And then I felt powerful.”

Relief floods through her. She does her best to hide it, but Will is who he is and he knows what she is. There’s no need to hide from him anymore. Gratified, she tells him, “It felt good, to get to end it.”

He nods distantly, shifting his hand so he can cover her fingers with his and hold.

“Then you understand,” he murmurs gently, cautiously. It takes her a moment to consider what he’s saying.

That's where we end the witch hunt, he had told her. *That's where your trail goes cold.*

And she had asked as if she hadn't already known, *How are you going to make it go cold?*

He leans across the seat and rubs his free hand up and down her arm, the warm friction comforting and grounding her. She notices that her hands are shaking and her heart pounding.

Acerbically she asks, "Why not just do it then and get it over with?"

"It's not as simple as that, and that's not what we're going to do," he counters, a quiet anger deep down in the lowest notes of his voice. "We promised you that we would protect you, and that promise stands. It doesn't go away because circumstances make it more dangerous or more difficult. Do you hear me?"

Will sounds like a father. Damn, but he does.

"Abigail?" He gentles her hair and tugs her in close when she begins to cry, shoulders trembling and chest heaving. He weaves an arm behind her and wraps her up in heat and soothing, softly spoken words, and her panic wanes. She sinks tiredly into Will's shoulder the way she used to with her mother when she couldn't sleep because she had always been plagued with bad dreams, had always been pursued by nightmares.

"Didn't I tell you we would take care of you?"

She sniffles, desperately holding back the gasping sob that wracks through her frame.

He goes on, quietly as if speaking to a frightened animal, "Didn't Hannibal promise that you would be free?"

Cora had told her to trust them. Without even knowing what they could possibly be up to, Cora had planted a seed of encouragement, of faith.

"Don't you believe in us?"

She nods against his shirt, ruffling her hair and smearing the tears on her cheek between them.

"I do, I trust you," she squeaks out, clenching his fingers tightly for lack of anything better to do with herself. "I don't trust anyone but you and Hannibal."

He leans back just slightly and brushes her hair away from her face, slicked down as it is with manifested fear and hopelessness. Will places a brief but intent kiss to her wrinkled forehead and reaches into the glove box for a tissue to give her.

"Beating death is just like giving it," he whispers, still carding a hand through her hair and allowing her time to recover and collect her faculties. "First you're afraid because you can't imagine ever getting passed it."

She runs the back of her hand under her chin. "And then?"

“And then you realize no one could ever stop you.”

Her father’s voice cuts through her brain like a burst of pain or like a bullet fired from a gun. His voice whispers on the inside of her eardrums, *See.*

“You really liked it, didn’t you?”

He doesn’t answer. He takes the keys out of the ignition and buries them in his pocket. He opens his door and raises a nonjudgmental eyebrow. He asks her, “Didn’t you?”

Will shuts the door and walks around the front of the car without coming around to Abigail’s door. He’s giving her time. He’s giving her a chance. She won’t run. She won’t be broken down again. This fear and the truth they share in is hardly the worst thing that’s ever happened to her. Will, as he has been through all of this ordeal alongside her and has dealt with his own experiences before having ever met her, is right about death.

Beating death is deifying, and so, equally, is giving it.

She touches the journal in her coat pocket and opens the door.

They walk in step to the automatic sliding doors at the front of the building, and Abigail doesn’t reconsider her situation once. Will is her ticket out of Baltimore and out of Jack Crawford’s crosshairs. She needs to be out of his crosshairs. Any longer and he would pull the trigger, even if making her escape with Will means going into the slaughter as a lamb prepared for the butcher’s feast.

Will actually has the tickets prepared when they get inside, so they walk right through the airport until they get to the shuttle that takes them to the B Gates and walk down to Gate B36. They sit around for about twenty minutes in the noisy terminal. Will buys her chai tea and coffee with espresso for himself.

Abigail has questions but nothing she can really put to words at the moment, though she must before they land in Minnesota. The ticket says they’ll be on the move for five hours with a layover stop in Philadelphia.

She sips her tea, too sweet but counteracted pretty evenly with cinnamon and cream. She has five hours.

If Hannibal were here she would at least feel as if this plan could actually work without one or all of them killed or incarcerated. She doesn’t worry about Will because she has no reason to suspect he is somehow out of step with Hannibal, but having them both here would make everything more concrete, more present. It would feel less like running from the law than it does if they were all sitting here together in a crowded, echoing room with crying children and sneezing passersby.

Her hand twitches for the journal, but the gate opens, and they’re off again. Will, for his part, does not try to make small talk or coax Abigail into speaking. He gets that she needs this space to collect and assess her thoughts. He knows that she must do so without his input.

When they sit down it's more of the same. Neither speaks and neither is particularly uncomfortable with the unspoken arrangement. Will stares up at the ceiling, listening, in all likelihood, to the conversations taking place around them. Abigail tries to match him for his aimless eavesdropping but can't focus enough to pay anyone her attention but for Will. She reaches her hand into her coat for the journal again but waits. She would prefer to be in the air when she reads what Cora wrote to her.

After what feels like a cursed lifetime, and what really has been a cursed lifetime, the doors lock and seal. Abigail looks back up the way they came and turns her eyes to the window when she feels Will watching her.

They ascend, the people chatter, and Will waits. A thousand miles away Hannibal waits, too. They gain elevation, and a flight attendant asks someone behind them to turn off his or her cell phone. It turns out to be a man, who follows instructions as directed but not without complaining about it for the next five minutes.

They're boring, regular people; people who whine about simple inconvenience, who don't realize there is a world apart from them and that their lives are benefactions they could never deserve or be worthy of. They have no idea how dull they are. They don't even begin to grasp how privileged they are just to breathe and how unaware they are of what sorts of tragedies lie in wait for them.

She asks, softly and just slightly dazed, "How many?"

To anyone else they could be speaking of anything at all; ex-girlfriends, job references, college applications, scholarships, or his dogs. She doesn't look at him, but she can sense that he is calculating an answer not only based on numerical terms. He is configuring how much he should tell her and if she will be afraid of him after.

"Five," he murmurs. "Two of those with Hannibal."

There went her next question, though she should have anticipated the answer. She always knew; always had to know that Hannibal was what Will said he was: the one who called the house, the one who did everything else.

"Who else?"

He is staring off and biting his lip when she turns to look at him. He shrugs and shakes his head. "The first one was my mother."

She starts, "You—"

"When she had me," he corrects before she can ask. Her horrified look dissipates. Why it had been there to begin with she isn't sure. She had grieved for not killing her father before he escalated and killed her mother. She couldn't have guessed at Will's situation, at what put him there, though it's unfair to attribute such a death to the fact of something he could never have stopped or changed.

But maybe everything they had gone through together had been that way. Maybe none of it could ever have been stopped or changed or salvaged. Maybe they were always going to end up right where they began, as Will said.

She had allowed her father to do horrible things, and she had done a horrible thing of her own. She would never be redeemed for killing Nick Boyle, nor would she ever repent for enjoying it. He threatened her in a world where she was a huntress and he was fodder for other predators of the night.

It had just never occurred to her that those predators might be the two beacons left in her dark and transformed world. She had to believe that it was for the best. She had to find some kind of solace in their monstrosity. It made them impervious and impenetrable just like she hoped they would be. It made them powerful, just like Will said death made him feel.

"What about…" The name catches in her throat. "What about Marissa?"

They share a long, hard look wherein something painful breaks loose in her chest. That indiscernible piece of herself leaves a dopamine trail in its wake as it shrivels and falls away, the way pain works as far as the brain and nerve endings are concerned. He doesn't have to say it, but he does. It's just how decent he is.

"He did it to implicate Nick Boyle."

It's very good that she knows already about Nick's innocence. If Freddie Lounds hadn't told her before, she might have tried to jump out of the plane.

She sits very still and keeps her eyes on the clouds outside the window. They blur and then clear and then blur.

Abigail removes the journal from her pocket and opens to the page with Cora's slanted print across the margin. She settles into her seat and tries to breathe and ignores everything that isn't Cora's messy handwriting in her journal.

Trust, Abigail. Remember to trust as much as you expect to be trusted.

She turns the page, frowning at the ambiguity of Cora's complete faith in Will and Hannibal when there is so much about them she doesn't know. Perhaps it's merely that she can't believe in anyone else to save Abigail but for them, and so she can't help but to trust them. Perhaps she is imparting wisdom she learned from her own experience trusting someone who held her life and future in his hands. Abigail runs her fingers along the page. Cora's penmanship is much better with a proper writing utensil, though it still wants for polishing.

Our third time in Devil's Den we came across a hiker who thought he recognized Anson for one thing or another and struck up a conversation. At the time I thought it would be okay because the man was nice and he liked Anson. His name was Victor. We were all talking for a while and Victor invited us to have dinner with him in town because it was getting dark anyway.

Anson started to get agitated. That was always his problem, his impatience. Victor tried to leave because he was uncomfortable, but Anson grabbed him and asked me what I wanted him to do. I told him to let Victor go and we could just go on the way we had been, but Anson started talking and getting himself unnecessarily worked up, and I didn't know what to do to make him stop. He accused me of wanting to run off with Victor and of conspiring against him to seek out the police.

Victor tried screaming then, but no one was around, and it just made Anson angrier. I really begged him not to, Abigail.

It doesn't take much to kill a person. We're so fragile, aren't we? Fall from high enough and your body breaks; catch the wrong kind of illness and your body withers. It only took a hard shove, and there Victor went down over the ledge. You know, I still remember the exact moment he broke his neck on the fourth tumble down. I suppose we never forget things like that.

We didn't even hide his body after. I think there must have been no way to know that he was murdered. Anson said we couldn't bury him or it would look like foul play, so we left him like that, sprawled out with his limbs all turned the wrong ways.

I've told you that I loved Anson, and I do still, but his kind of madness could never have left those woods. It was the type that would have destroyed him before it ever moved on to burn the world the way he would have liked.

Nothing like Victor ever happened again, but I had made up my mind not to be trapped with him in the web he had built around himself. I decided I would have Noah, so you see, that part was very much my choice. When Anson saw that I had done it intentionally, he was strangely proud of me. I thought he might be angry, but he seemed pleased that I had taken control of my life even as it was bound inextricably with his.

What happened with the hiker in the woods saved me from what I would otherwise have been, horrible as it was. I wish you would take that to heart and remember it if ever you find yourself steeped so far in trouble and insanity that you can't see the light. I felt that way often with Anson, though that feeling subsided after Noah. I've found that birth destroys death, if only for a little while, and we aren't all born only once, but then, you know that better than most, don't you?

I think you have a lot left that you need to do before you are safe again, Abigail, and I do hope that you will be safe someday. However, you must know that without people like Victor or Nicholas Boyle, some of us never come to know who we are.

Without people like Anson or like Will Graham or Dr. Lecter, people like us never accept what we have become.

You can accept who and what you are without liking it, Abigail, though liking it often can come later.

The writing cleans up slightly as if, with the bulk of the letter completed, Cora allowed herself to slow down and write more legibly.

You told me once to never be sorry for a lie if it could protect me. Please extend that courtesy to yourself.

Never be sorry for a lie that protects you, and never be sorry for a horrible thing that changed you. Lies you can undo with truth, but actions remain as they are, immutable. Who you are and what you have done are tied, and whatever you think of yourself or your past, I hope you know that there are those of us who know you and love you because you survived. Surviving is enough to conquer your demons, but it isn't living.

Your friend in this and in all things,
Cora

Abigail slides the cover shut and rests her head back against the seat. She closes her eyes and counts up to ten and back to zero. Will is awake and alert beside her. He returns her curious glance but doesn't try to speak to her. She's grateful, and she can't express what else she feels. There is no way to get to it all. They just don't have the time. Instead she takes his hand and looks again out the window. It's enough just to hold him for now. She can wait until they are reunited with Hannibal to ask her questions.

She falls asleep once on the way to Philadelphia and then again as they're waiting for the second plane to board. They land in Minnesota and go to the cabin, but Hannibal isn't there.

"He's at the house," Will tells her, walking through the cabin and eyeing the antlers mounted up on the wall.

"What are we doing here?"

"I wanted to make sure that you're okay, before we go see him."

"You want to make sure I'm not angry enough to try and get back at him for killing my friend."

They are two killers having a conversation about another killer in a place where her father taught her to gut animals after she'd killed them. If she thinks too much about it, she will laugh at the bizarre turn of events. She hadn't expected this would be her life either, running from the police and into the arms of two murderers.

She muses sadly, "How did we get so much of what we didn't ask for?"

Will is quick with a reply. He answers, "Everyone asks for family. Everyone asks to be accepted."

"But at what cost? Everyone else suffers just for us to keep going. How can it be right?"

Abigail touches the point of one tine and holds her hand over the one bloodied by Marissa when Hannibal killed her. She takes her hand away.

Anson killed a hiker named Victor for Cora, and Hannibal had killed for Abigail and probably for Will, too. Will said they'd even done two together. She can't let it be any more or any less than an analogy in her mind: Victor is to Cora as Marissa is to Abigail. They had survived; they had won, and it had to be for a reason.

She turns back to Will and sees him staring at the bloodied antlers, too. Some shred of a memory shivers over the surface of his calm, and then he is back and looking at her.

"We should go see him."

Will nods, and they leave the wretched place that she will never have to revisit again so long as she lives, however long that may be. She nurses the journal in her pocket like a small animal on the drive to the house. Some blues song is playing on the radio. Will hums along, and Abigail settles into the seat and observes him so at peace and so contented with the way things have turned out. He's had plenty of time to think about it, she supposes. He's confident everything will go just the way he and Hannibal have planned.

He trusts Hannibal, so why shouldn't he, she muses internally.

It starts to feel like a joke.

"What's going to happen to you after today?" He doesn't look away from the road, but he does stop humming to the music. "Hannibal won't take the fall for this. It has your name written all over it."

He doesn't get rattled, not even a little bit. He drawls, "Yes, meticulously so."

"You aren't worried about going to prison? Jack Crawford will make sure you never get out if he thinks you killed whoever Hannibal frames you for killing."

"Jack has bigger problems than somebody framing me, which is what we'll tell him once the idea starts to grow and fester in his head." Will squeezes his fingers into a testing fist and then lightly grips the steering wheel again. "There's someone out there he wants more than he wants the copycat, but what he doesn't realize is he's the same person."

Abigail gapes. It's not—he can't—if he means…

She tries to get the thought out: "That serial killer who…that man Gideon tried to be him, but you killed him. He thought he was…"

"The Chesapeake Ripper," Will supplies helpfully, unperturbed. "Killed Jack's trainee, disappeared her body until the reappearance of a severed arm to prove his true identity; back with a very recent, very intimate string of murders. The victims, three, as per his typical M.O., were Yusuf Vartanian—" Will points with one finger. He goes on, counting on his fingers, "—Gilbert Parish, and Cary Villeneuve."

Abigail holds her arms around herself, pressing her arm against the journal so the weight of it nudges against her ribs, a shield. Will keeps talking in that same low register as if someone else might hear them, as if Abigail will bolt if he says the wrong thing.

That must be it, really. She can't run from him or Hannibal; they are all she has left and they are her only way to salvation. On her own she will die or be captured. With them, she isn't sure just yet.

They pull up to the driveway, and Will lets Abigail lead the way. The front door is locked, but she remedies that with the spare key over the doorframe. She looks once at Will and then crosses the threshold warily. She can hear shuffling in the kitchen and smell meat warm and cooked. She stops and gives Will a hard glare.

"Tell me he didn't make dinner."

"It wouldn't make for a convincing lie, would it?" He swings around the corner up the short set of stairs and plods ahead of her into the kitchen. She hears him saying something to Hannibal in a subdued tone. He doesn't do it to keep what he says private from her; he merely does it out of a familiar sense of intimacy between him and Hannibal. She finds that even as she can't make herself break for the door or advance into the kitchen, there is no route she would favor over the other. She wouldn't prefer to run, and she wouldn't prefer to stay with them. She is in that realm of gray that has haunted and held her captive the last few months at Port Haven.

Hannibal chuckles at something Will says, and it is too surreal to ignore anymore what they are and what they've collectively done; that they've burned so much to keep each other.

But then, she supposes. *Everything burns eventually.*

The three of them will burn someday, maybe today or maybe tomorrow, but not in this moment right here and now, the fleeting, already-gone notion of a moment that is totally within the present, unsullied by the past and unlimited by the future. Abigail climbs the steps and walks into the kitchen. Will is helping Hannibal set the food on the dinner table in the next room. Abigail wanders into a seat and waits patiently for the rest of the evening to commence.

Hannibal is the first to speak to her, and of course, he uses his time to announce the dish.

He says, "Mediterranean dried plum and olive chicken; farro with chimichurri on the side."

"Thank you," Abigail chokes out hoarsely. She taps her fingers spasmodically on the table. She wishes they wouldn't do this.

"Have you eaten?"

"Not since breakfast," she replies distractedly.

"Are you hungry?"

She looks up at him; finally looks into those eyes that she wants to scorn and hate and curse, but there he is, himself. He is Hannibal, boyfriend to the scruffy guy in the fishing jacket with dog hair on his expensive, fancy suits and an unlikely surrogate father; keeper of her secrets and guardian of her life. She blinks, and something in the back of her throat pinches to

suggest to her that she might cry, but she doesn't. She doesn't even remotely feel like crying but for that overwhelming feeling building up and roiling beneath the layers of skin and beneath the rushing blood.

Her stomach grumbles, and Hannibal smiles.

"I will take that as a yes."

"What are you going to do?" She ignores the hunger pangs stirring in her gut at full throttle now at the immediate promise and proximity of food. "What are we doing here?"

"Having dinner, Abigail," he answers effortlessly. Growing gravely serious, he adds, "A good meal will give you strength, and we need you to be strong." He sets a full plate of food down before her and touches her hair. "Will you give me this, myli?"

"A last supper," she inquires, voice wavering.

He corrects her, gently, "A last meal between us for what will be a very long time."

Abigail swallows, considers the food on the plate, and nods once. Will sits to her left and Hannibal to her right. They eat for a while, and it only takes a few bites for Abigail to take stock of her hunger. She would suspect Will of purposely not feeding her all day so she would eat with them now, but she wouldn't have wanted to eat in the airport anyway. It didn't much matter either way. The chicken is juicy and the farro is grainy and salty in a way that tastes good with the parsley mixed in with it. She guesses at what they will do to hide the evidence of their dinner here today once they are finished as she drinks down her water.

If Hannibal is who Will says he is, concealing this meal will not be an issue. Concealing a murder would not be an issue.

Hannibal breaks the terse silence and not to ramble politely about the origins of the dish.

"Which of us would you prefer to do it, Abigail?"

"Do what?" She probably doesn't need him to clarify, but at the same time, she really does need to hear him say it in so many words. She takes a pointed sip from her cup. "Kill me?"

"Abigail," Will sighs, taking his chin in his hand.

"No, Will." Hannibal reaches across the table and stays him with his hand on Will's arm. "Let Abigail voice her concerns."

"My concerns," she repeats blandly. Her stomach turns, threatening to send the food back up.

"We have not brought you here to kill you, Abigail. We mean to send you away where you will be safe from Jack Crawford's purview."

"You said all that stuff about deer and losing their tracks after you wound them," she says, turning her glare on Will. Hannibal clears the table. She doesn't recall eating most of her food, but her stomach is full and warm in spite of the emotions warring inside her. "What

does that mean if you're not going to kill me? You wouldn't say before when I asked you what it meant."

Her hands are shaking again, so she forces them in her lap.

"You said it already. This has me written all over it; I'm unstable, I'm stained by your father, and I've done things and will do things that no one ever thought me capable of." He rises and comes to kneel by her chair. "And all of that's true, Abigail."

"But what are you going to do to me?"

He stares back up at her, his eyes boring into her eyes, and then drops his gaze to the scarf around her neck. He swallows once and then catches her eyes again, though she can't see or hear him anymore.

His hands find her face and his lips land in her hair. Hannibal has come around the other side of her and draped one arm around her back. He's warm and safe, but he isn't; there's no way he could ever be.

Will knew this would happen. He foresaw this day coming that day they spoke on the phone. They had had that entire conversation about Cora, about the truth. She could repeat what he had told her verbatim because she had made it a rule to abide by, for Cora's sake, for her own, for the sake of their friendship and their delicate, shared reality.

He had told her, *You'll try to make yourself believe that something about her had changed because it would be easier to forget her that way, but whoever she reveals herself to be, she'll always have been that person, no matter how much you wish she wasn't.*

And she had said, *It won't change who you are to me.*

He promised her then.

He promised her, and he was right.

"Okay," she gasps, ducking out of the space between Will's neck and shoulder. She scrubs the back of her sleeve across her eyes and nods, eyes downcast. "Okay, what do I do? Tell me what to do."

"I will be only a moment," Hannibal says softly before disappearing into the kitchen. She hears him shuffling about, probably to rid the scene of prints of traces of food. It occurs to her that the utilities have most likely been shut off and that Hannibal probably had to call in or pick up the food from somewhere since he wouldn't have been able to cook in the kitchen, which leaves the problem of dishes. He will probably just dispose of them completely without bothering to clean them.

"This isn't the life I wanted for you," Will admits. He drops his voice and probes her face for some expression she isn't aware or in control of. "I thought you could go to school or meet some awful boy with a boring job and a clunky car." He shakes his head fondly, lips turning up once in a nostalgic smile for the future she gambled away when she decided abject

obedience was a fitting cost to pay for her life. “I actually wanted to have that experience of chasing some heartbreaking idiot off the porch because he hurt you, not that I wanted you hurt, but I wanted that chance to defend you. I would have liked to prove to you that I could protect you if you needed me to.”

“You have,” she mumbles, gnawing on her lip and tasting salt. With a grimace she says, “Of course you have.”

Will sighs and drops his head against the side of the chair. She places her hand gently in his hair and stills with the distinct feeling of petting a big cat at rest. He peers up at her from beneath the long, dark curls scattered across his forehead. Her hand migrates to his cheek, and she knows he is giving her some semblance of power over him and over the situation, as much as he absolutely can bestow her with.

Her nostrils flare once, and she looks down at Will’s hands relaxed on his knees.

“How will you do it?”

“The way your father did: quick, clean. You’ll bleed out quickly. It’ll look like it did when all of this started.”

Will squeezes her hand and when she looks, some light has returned to his eyes that has been mostly absent from him today. She squeezes his hand back and manages to say, “I want you to do it.”

“What?”

The word stutters just that much as it leaves him, and that ripple in the façade he has been forcing all day is the sole convincing factor that she needs from him. Hannibal is not afraid of hurting her, but Will is. His fear means he has something to lose if he errs in any way, something precious that he would do everything he could to help and not to harm. As much as she trusts Hannibal, it should be Will.

“You do it,” she mouths, looking away from his wide, open eyes. “Please.”

He nods a few times uncertainly and then pats her hand once with his to comfort her. Hannibal reenters the room, and they stand.

She didn’t think it would be like a parade or a funeral march, but the short walk into the kitchen is a bit anti-climactic, even if the room is rampant with memories, not all of them good or bad. They are only memories, and this moment now is a memory, too, falling through gravity and approaching the moment that vaults it into the past.

Will holds his hand out, and Hannibal places a knife in his palm handle-first.

“Help Cora,” she blurts out. Panic flares in her at the cold press of the knife against her skin for only a few seconds. She brings her eyes up to Hannibal’s. He nods solemnly.

“I will do everything in my power to free her of that place.”

“And take care of each other,” she grits out, on the verge of hyperventilating. She reaches out for Hannibal’s arm, and he holds her hand in place. He extends the other one over her shoulder to hold onto Will where he stands immediately behind her. Will holds onto Abigail, bumping the back of her head with his forehead and whispering words of apology and regret and encouragement. Mostly he tells her he’s sorry.

“You know how, Will,” Hannibal murmurs. His arm shifts a little, probably to accommodate his hand in Will’s hair. “You have been Garrett Jacob Hobbs, and you have lived this moment. You know. You see.”

“Don’t do that,” Will commands softly. That dark, flinty tone sinks into his voice, and a spike of fear shoots through Abigail’s core. She searches Hannibal’s eyes, but he is watching Will. “Don’t try to talk me into going there. I’m here, I’m *here*. I’m not leaving her with anyone else.”

Careful to keep still and tentative to speak, Abigail asks, “Will?”

“It’s okay, it’s okay. It’s me, only me. It’s just me, baby.” He kisses her hair, and she can feel him trembling. Voice nearly a whimper he continues his unbroken litany of, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m *sorry*.”

Before she can question whether things are really going to proceed the way they said they would, there is a tug and a faint ripping sensation of an object passing through her skin in a familiar, old burn like a dormant spirit being turned loose or a faded memory being cut out of her. The world tilts, and Hannibal’s hands are on her arms, indistinct points of heat and tension sparking into her muscles. The ground comes up beneath her back solid and real and cold.

They stand above her. Will removes his glasses to rub his arm across his face. The knife in his hand drips blood. His wrist and fingers are doused in the red. Hannibal’s front is soaked through.

Hannibal crouches down as her vision begins to blur and darken. Headlights flash through the kitchen window, and she imagines a lighthouse on some faraway seashore trying to coax her out of obscurity and back to life. She imagines that lighthouse on the same beach as the one she dreamt of being on with Hannibal and Will after they killed Nadine in her sleep.

The thought darts through her mind that maybe Will cut her too deeply and maybe she won’t wake up this time. Maybe it’s what she deserves. Maybe lighthouses exist to protect the good people in the world from people like them, people who exist and thrive in the darkness; people who survive no matter what the price or who has to pay it.

The perpetual gray clouding her vision ossifies into an impenetrable black. She melds into it and rests, tired of running and tired of pretending to be fearful or sorry for all that she is; she is sick of being preyed upon.

Her father raised her to be a hunter. Her new family hunts, too.

If she can survive them, she can claim them again someday. She will make it her life's goal to be strong enough for them the way they need her to be strong.

She summons the memory, a vivid one, of Cora telling her to be happy before they parted ways, and she resolves to do that, too. If just given the chance she will take the world back and rip it to shreds. She will earn the right to reassemble the family of monsters she has made. She will do it all, and they will destroy their enemies together as it was always meant to be, as they had always shown they would.

Someone moves her in the darkness, and her skin chills underneath where she can't warm it.

Much of her life has been that way, and she can't find it in herself to be alarmed. The black comes with no bad dreams.

Beating death is just like giving it, he told her. *First you're afraid because you can't imagine ever getting passed it. And then you realize no one could ever stop you.*

Beating death is deifying, and so, equally, is giving it.

Chapter End Notes

The Winter's Tale by Billy Shakespeare

The painting referenced is The Monk by the Sea by Caspar David Friedrich

Vide Cor Meum from *Hannibal (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack)* by Hans Zimmer

"At first I was terrified, and then I felt powerful…" dialog from Relevés of Bryan Fuller's Hannibal

Mediterranean Dried Plum and Olive Chicken
http://extras.sj-r.com/recipes/recipe/233/

Farro with Chimichurri
http://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/20100224/lifestyle/100229849#page=4

Original Lyrics for Crossroads by George Braith

Other chapter titles and lyrics from The Doors

Not to Touch the Earth/Someday Soon

Chapter Summary

Sooner or later God's going to cut you down.

Chapter Notes

Not to touch the earth/Not to see the sun/Nothing left to do but run, run, run, let's run/Let's run/House upon the hill/Moon is lying still/Shadows of the trees/Witnessing the wild breeze/C'mon, baby, run with me/Let's run

Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good
That I myself have done unto myself?
O no! Alas, I rather hate myself
For hateful deeds committed by myself.
I am a villain; yet I lie, I am not.
Richard III (V.iii.181-201)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Abigail dreams in flashing bursts of color and noise. Some of what passes her by lands and takes root down in her nerve endings; some of the images shooting across her corneas linger a while longer and create deeper mental representations in her mind beyond the flickering moment that it skips away. Most of it is lost in between the passing seconds. What she remembers is Hannibal's hands maneuvering something freezing cold and heavy around her neck. She remembers a swollen blue sky and Will hovering somewhere within it, blood on his chin and a red, bunched up handprint at his collar.

A process of transition occurs somewhere. The ground floats away, and the vicious, biting pain at the start of her spine pulses agitatedly, radiating obnoxiously outward on one side of her face and down her jaw. It serves to remind her incessantly that the nightmare isn't over, not yet.

There is a sound of people arguing through a buffered space, and Will's face is there again over hers. His eyes are red around the edges, but his face is dry of tears. He adjusts the thing under her chin so that the coldest part rotates and slides over her throat and chest comfortably. The cool compress, whatever it is, feels better than the cold creeping into her fingertips and toes.

She bats questioningly at the obstruction she can't see, looking around dazedly to see where they are. Something gauzy and thick is wrapped firmly around the crown of her head and down her chin. It holds her hair in place and keeps her from moving too much. Her heart beats almost too quickly for her to hear over its confused, panicked racing, but Will's hands are there on her arms. He calls her back the way he couldn't the first time they found each other this way, her bleeding and him doused in the red.

"What's…" she mumbles lispingly. "Where am…"

His hand makes its way to her scalp. He gently brushes his fingers along her hairline and shushes her, gently.

"They're taking you somewhere safe."

Abigail swears she asks who, but her mouth only flaps uselessly. Her breath stutters once, and that's the extent of what she can manage under the circumstances. Will doesn't need to hear the question.

"Hannibal's uncle." He looks over his shoulder, presumably out the window. They're arguing outside; Abigail doesn't know over what, though she could hazard a guess. "His aunt, too; although—" he sighs and brings his shoulders up into a small shrug. He continues in a small voice, "That's a longer story we don't have time for."

She remembers Hannibal mentioned his aunt once the night he told Abigail they would adopt her, him and Will. He said he and the woman didn't part as friends.

Abigail sucks in a strained breath as the argument picks up in heat outside. She asks, "Where?"

She hears a muffled, enraged voice filtering in from outside: *"I don't do this for you, Hannibal; I do this so you will not irreparably destroy this girl's life. Never mind what you have dragged that man through."*

Will flinches minutely; Abigail blinks. The driver's side door opens, and someone slides wordlessly into the seat. Abigail can make out the swooping coiffure of Hannibal's uncle in the rear-view mirror, though it strains her neck to look that way and painfully jostles the dressings about her head. Will's hand covers her hand and holds, tightly and maybe with just the suggestion of a tremor in his wrist. She wishes she could hear what Hannibal says in his

defense, if he speaks up at all. Her fingers twitch with the hungry desire to shelter him from the words of someone who can actually hurt him.

However, she also wishes that she could delight in the possibility of those words hurting him. She can't, to put it plainly. It might be that she doesn't truly believe anything the woman says to him will sting him, but it might be that she'd rather sting him herself.

"I don't know where yet," Will whispers, recapturing Abigail's attention. She squeezes his hand and alarms at the stiff weakness of her fingers. "I may never know."

"Don't," she mouths. "It's not goodbye."

He smiles through a grimace, and the shape behind the tinted glass window of the large backseat moves out from behind Will. Viciously but with little dramatic flair to the words beyond the threatening oath they carry, the woman outside says to Hannibal, *"If she dies, your life here is finished. I swear it."*

He answers her curtly and devoid of venom, *"Then perhaps you had better go."*

The car door opens behind Will and a cold breeze rushes in. Abigail shivers forcefully with it and then relaxes slightly at the blanket Will unrolls and tucks in around her sides. He leans over, kisses her once on the forehead, and holds her eyes with his for an unmeasured length of time before pulling reluctantly away and disappearing out the door. Abigail spies Hannibal reaching out for him with a mediating touch to bring him back to a world he can live and breathe in. Will's shoulders heave a few times, but his back is to Abigail, and she misses whatever he does next.

A woman slides into the car across from Abigail and squeezes the dark wine-colored IV bag hooked up precariously to a crooked metal stand propped against the opposite rear door. Abigail follows the line blearily to the point where it vanishes into her arm and trickles the life-giving fluid into her body. The seats have been taken down to allow for much more room where the two of them watch each other warily.

The door she came in through slams. Hannibal peers in through the window, finds Abigail's eyes, and nods once before pounding twice on the hood of the car. They're moving again, and maybe it is goodbye.

Abigail is tired, deathly so. Her limbs weigh heavily like lead at her sides. They have lost the warmth and the comfortable pressure of Will's hands. There is only the alien texture of something flat and solid resting on her stomach. She ponders sleepily over what it could be for a few silent minutes and decides it must be her journal. The murmuring grumble of tires on dirt amplifies into a hum once they hit the back roads. It's dark outside and there are trees and black sky all around. Robertus, if she remembered his name correctly, drives fast.

"You're…" she rasps. A spurt of warmth escapes from the bandaged slit in her neck.

"Don't speak," the woman of dark hair and low voice tonelessly chastises her.

“Murasaki,” Abigail chokes out, ever her mother’s stubborn, willful daughter. She names the man, too: “And Robertus.” The man flicks his eyes her way and then back to the road but doesn’t speak. Abigail has no use for naming them, but it feels important. “I’m sorry they’ve…” She trails off to wheeze with difficulty and finishes, “Asked you to do this.”

The Lady called Murasaki crosses the expansive empty area separating them and sits down behind Abigail where she can only look up at her upside down, oval face.

“You should rest.” A phantom hand nudges the blanket at Abigail’s shoulder so it tucks under her arm more completely and traps in the heat. The fuzzy edges of her vision creep inward and cloud her sight. She closes her eyes and breathes, and her mind goes pleasantly blank.

Pictures begin to quiver to life in her mind’s eye: pictures of missed opportunities and intangible beauty. She sees a dark-haired little boy playing with his mother’s golden hair and a man swooping down to steal the boy from her with every intention of giving him back. She sees herself, Will, and Hannibal as that family; sees the three of them as that fragile yet unbreakable chain of creation, destruction, and screaming, sanguinary life.

Hannibal feeds Will her heart as she sleeps, and all he has to say for himself as she dies is, *“You gave it to me.”*

And Will says, jovially, *“It’s ours to share.”*

“Am I going to be all right,” she asks them, fading and falling and twisting and burning. She screams pleadingly at them, though her tongue disintegrates in her mouth, *“Do you think this has to change us?”*

Will leans over her and brushes his fingers soothingly through her hair. He says, *“This saves you.”*

It saves me. The mantra and variations of it echo in her mind like the cry of a wounded animal or that of a gunshot. *It saves me, it saves you, it saves us. Let it save you, please.*

Help Cora.

Take care of each other.

Something jostles Abigail’s arm a few times. She feels it through her slumber as she never quite slipped under all the way. Her eyes fall lazily open and her arms relax. Patient, strong hands insinuate the blanket underneath her body again where she had squirmed free of it as she fitfully slept.

The woman still cautiously poised over her murmurs, “Be peaceful, little flower.” Almost nostalgically, Abigail hears her utter the phrase, “Out of the frying pan into the fire.”

She closes her eyes, and the blackness descends, and blackness is all it is endlessly for miles and miles until even it ceases to be.

At first I was terrified, Will had told her. *And then I felt powerful.*

Fingers squeeze her shoulder through the blanket. Maybe she should have run when she had the chance. For now all she can do is sleep, and so she sleeps, wondering how she could ever be happy or whole again.

--

You'll be all alone when the cannibals cry/All by yourself inside infancy's lie/Someday soon, someday soon/Someday soon, someday soon

Will catches a plane home in the morning. It takes him to Dulles International in Sterling fifteen minutes out from Wolf Trap. He calls a cab, and the driver who picks him up blows through every stop sign and most of the red lights on the way, so he gets home in ten. Will tries Hannibal's landline in Baltimore twice after he lands, but he only gets his tinny voice on the answering machine followed by crackling, unsympathetic dead air.

He doesn't know quite how Hannibal meant to get home except that he caught a bus from Minneapolis headed south. Will only knew that much because he drove Hannibal to the bus station the previous night after his aunt and uncle drove off with Abigail bloodied and so nearly broken in the backseat of their town car.

He sets his cell phone on the counter, stomach rumbling distastefully at the suggestion of verticality. Fixing the queasiness will be easy, though he really hates vomiting and would rather avoid it.

Hannibal had been so insistent about the ear. Will wishes it would just melt in his stomach and leave him alone, but it would be a huge waste of a sacrifice. The only reason it's there—the only reason Will let Hannibal take it from Abigail in the first place—is that if she were dead, Abigail would never miss an ear just the same way that Miriam Lass would never miss an arm. Dead things don't want for vanity or comfort or practicality. Dead things crumble, and Jack would need to believe that Abigail would be one of those things that could never want or need or exist after today.

Will rationalizes to himself over and over. It is the only way to stay sane and keep from flying off the handle.

Abigail and Hannibal are both counting on Will to carry this burden for them; they are both depending on Will to shoulder the debts that will take them to safety. He must believe that their mutual auspices merit his fall. He must believe that these tokens offered up like burnt animal carcasses will please the aloof divinity that is their fate.

His stomach clenches once more, hard enough to rattle his whole frame and knock him halfway into a crouch. Winston noses at his leg, concerned and hopeful and genuine. Will

swallows and throws the back door open wide so they can run out into the mud and the uprooted grass. He sheds the clean clothes Hannibal had brought for him in Minnesota, peels off the gloves hiding his blood-crusted fingernails, and stands outside on the back porch barefoot and shivering. He recalls a shimmering, distant memory from the first morning he spent with Hannibal just after the Preston case took them away to Williamsport.

Will had wandered downstairs, enshrouded in sleep and completely naked, and seen the dishes brought in from their dinner. He had seen the red flaked strawberry sauce clinging to the angel cake crumbs like blood would have clung to James Casson's blond hair. He had been more asleep than awake, but he had known enough and seen enough not to be deterred from the truth a single second longer. He had babbled about blood and fire, and Hannibal must have deduced easily enough that Will had found him out at last.

He couldn't have been ignorant of it, and yet he had led Will back up the stairs and placed him in his bed. He had taken him a change of clothes and made them breakfast as if it was nothing more than business as usual. Maybe Will didn't run because of those kindnesses. Maybe he never ran because he just hadn't felt inspired to attempt it until his window had long since passed. Hannibal felt safe for much longer than he actually was, and like a fly trapped in a saccharine mess of drying honey, Will had found himself blissfully ensnared with no end or relief in sight but the endless prospect of all that golden sweetness.

He coughs and shivers as he heads back inside to splash water from the sink onto his face. As he's rubbing his hand down the back of his neck, his body snaps forward at the waist, and his abdominal muscles seize up with an involuntary dry heave. One prolonged, breathless retch is all it takes. He doesn't hear the wet slap of flesh dropping into the basin of the sink over his own rasping breaths, but it lies there, louder and far more incriminating than any combination of words he could ever say.

The ear remains, accusing and judging him. He tries Hannibal's phone again.

The phone rings six times and clicks over to the answering machine. Will goes to hang up, but the receiver scratches and sends static rustling across the connection. Hannibal breathes in and out, raggedly.

"Hello, Will."

"It came up," he states flatly. Both of them are out of breath; both of them are exhausted.

"Do you feel better then?"

"I feel primitive."

"There are worse things for you to feel," Hannibal breathes out in a rushed exhale. He sucks in another breath. A door slams on his end, and several solid thumps punctuate their silence. "From primitivity arises civilization, and from ashes—" he breaks off to inhale deeply. Something else drops onto the floor. "New creatures are born."

"From my ashes you mean." Will turns off the water and bends down to rest his head on the cool counter top.

“I prefer to consider it a collective effort, but yes. You will burn for this as Urbain Grandier burned for the madness and corruption of others.”

“Like Georgia Madchen burned for ours.”

Hannibal sighs, not in reaction to what Will has said. A few more quiet sounds of fabric and nearly soundless breaths in and out tell Will that Hannibal has lain down in his bed.

With real curiosity he asks, “Where did you go?”

“I rode to Sioux Falls on the bus and caught a plane from there to Baltimore.”

“You leave an elaborate paper trail.” Will wanders into the den and catches sight of the backdoor he left ajar as he falls onto the couch near the piano. “Or did you steal a ticket somewhere along the way?”

“I may have.” Hannibal hums disinterestedly. “It hardly would have been the most important part of my night.”

Will lets his head fall back onto the cushion tiredly and stares up blankly at the ceiling. His mouth tastes of copper.

“They have assured me that they will call tomorrow if she does not recover,” Hannibal says wearily. “If all is well, I will not hear from them until next week.”

“So no news is good news?” Will extends his hand to Penelope when she comes snuffling at his shoulder and smiles sadly when she snorts on his forehead. Timid of the answer, he asks, “And what about us?”

Everything goes painfully still on Hannibal’s line.

“I just…I mean, what am I supposed to do once they take me away, just wait?”

“It will serve both of us best if you bide your time until the trial; Jack Crawford will still have need of you, even if he would rather not use you by that time.”

“Because of you,” Will says in reference to the Chesapeake Ripper.

“Jack’s weakness is his obsession. We will exploit his need to fuel it.”

Will scrubs at his forehead with the heel of his hand and sighs. “Will you be much longer?”

“I thought I might sleep briefly and then make my way over, unless you required my presence?”

“Require doesn’t cover the half of it,” Will mumbles. He blinks around a few free radical tears and tugs harmlessly on his hair. He huffs a shaky sigh, adding, “But you know it doesn’t, and you know that I hate it when you make me say things that you already know out loud.”

Hannibal might be smiling or frowning or yawning, but the blood swims furiously in Will's ears and he detects nothing over the unsettled roar of it. He wrestles with himself for control of his airway and doesn't let the frightened sob tear out of his throat in the cathartic release for which it yearns. A tear escapes through his lashes and he swipes at it angrily.

Irritated at himself and at Hannibal for being the collected, homicidal jerk that he is, Will demands of him, "Just come over and sleep here, please."

Probably Hannibal wills himself to be patient because of the merciless tremble in Will's voice. He doesn't show any telltale signs of being in any way flustered or frustrated with Will the way that Will is with him. He wouldn't put it passed Hannibal to be calm simply because the two of them out of sorts would be too much to deal with. It has been the case with them when they argue that one will flare up while the other backs off or retreats entirely. They had never been very skilled at maintained confrontation on even ground, ironically.

"As you wish it, Will." Hannibal grunts slightly as he labors to sit up and then eventually stand. "Give me one hour."

Grudgingly Will says, "Thank you."

Hannibal disconnects the call not a moment later. Will lays his phone down on his stomach and closes his eyes.

The rush of panic and heat that had coursed hotly through him finally fades from his system, and he stands to go outside. Winston trots up to him muddy and with his leash dangling from his collar. He reaches out to unclasp it. Vanessa probably took the dogs walking while he was out and forgot to do a leash count before she left; that, or Will did it, blind and thoughtless with fever, sometime after he got home. Hannibal told him those lapses might gradually start to manifest anew since the inflammation in his brain had been rekindled.

Will looks up at the sky, slightly freckled with clouds but otherwise pale blue and vast. The wind is cold, but he doesn't try to leave it. He will be in a cage of his own making soon enough, and this open, free sky will not be a luxury afforded him for some time.

His dogs are a comfort that will not be accessible to him either. He hasn't thought about what to do with them yet, but he hopes someone might offer to watch them for as long as he is incapacitated. He has considered leaving Madeline with Hannibal but doesn't actually know if the man would be able to look after a small animal completely in his charge. He hadn't done a very good job with either Will or Abigail, though perhaps this final act of desperation, whatever his endgame turns out to be, would make the shortcomings worth their trouble.

He sits on the back porch, frozen through his shorts and t-shirt. Simon, Fenris, and Penelope patrol the outer edge of the yard. The others set up shop around him, assuaged by his presence and lounging on the wet earth as if it were a warm, comfortable bed. Will clutches at his arms and waits, thoughts of his youth on his mind.

He had never told anyone what he told Abigail about his mother, probably because it wasn't true, in a strictly physical sense. He had made it seem as if she had died during childbirth, but something else entirely had happened. It helped to think that she could have died having him

because maybe she had, the way his father used to tell it. They had engaged in a regrettable screaming match sometime in the middle of his high school years, and his father had phrased it using those words: *you killed your mother when you came out of her; she left because of you.*

You may as well have killed her, his father had seethed at him. *You kill everything you touch.*

He had never spoken to Will that way before, and he never spoke to him that way after, but it changed everything.

Do you think killing someone has to change you?

I think it's supposed to.

He should have simply told her yes and given her no leeway or excuse to come out of Tartaros unchanged. The world worked that way sometimes, but he shouldn't have given her permission to accept that it did. Killing someone, whether with hate or with a blade or with a bullet, should leave a person scarred.

Will doesn't suppose Hannibal bears any scars at all anywhere on him. He devoured the one great torment of his life, and he had devoured others in much the same way. He would have devoured Will if it came to that. He isn't fool enough to think it wouldn't have ended that way if he hadn't been swept up in the madness, but he couldn't say that he expected it would play out this way. He didn't know he would become that monster his father had meant to teach him to rescue from death; he didn't foresee that he would become Grandier condemned to die by immolation for sins he did commit.

He couldn't have ever imagined that he would offer his soul up to the devil so willingly, so *adoringly.*

Yet, none of it surprises him. He can't be surprised by the things men do anymore, and even if he feels more like a monster these days, he is still a man. Be it killers or beasts, Will can no longer assume innocent astonishment at the cruelty he sees. He is one of those cruel things; he is everything that Hannibal saw in him the moment they first laid eyes on each other.

Tired of the cold, Will walks back into the house and calls Winston in to wipe him down with a towel so he won't track mud all over the house. He is tossing the towel vaguely into the bathtub when he hears tires grumbling down the drive around the front of the house and abruptly stands to his feet. Hannibal approaches the door as Will pulls it open. He certainly looks as if he has seen better days. His suit is spotless, of course, but the gel in his hair has fallen since yesterday, and his eyes are red with the impatient need for sleep.

"You look like hell," Will remarks quietly.

"Would that make you the devil after all?" Hannibal steps passed Will into the house and stops for a moment to allow the dogs to sniff him cheerfully. They have accepted him by now for a friend.

Will follows Hannibal through the den and answers cleverly, "The Devil of Loudon."

Hannibal gives him a tired if slightly amused expression before slinking into the bathroom across the hall from Will's bedroom. Will moves to sit on the bed and wait for Hannibal to rejoin him after he's rid himself of the suit and everything else that might show proof of his prolonged visit with Will before they call Jack.

He doesn't take too long, though he looks much worse for wear stripped of the perfectly tailored ensemble. None of the dogs attempt to steal his spot beside Will on the right side of the bed nearest the window and farthest from the door to the hall. As Hannibal rounds the foot of the bed, Will alerts to the darkening bruise blooming across Hannibal's collar bone and down the inside of his arm.

"Jesus, what the hell happened after you got off the train?"

"I stole a ticket," Hannibal explains easily. He hisses a tight inhale through his teeth and lies down delicately after pulling the blanket back. Will shuffles down beneath the covers to lie flat beside him and brush his fingers carefully over the deep ruddy splotch painting Hannibal's torso like a continent superimposed over a cartographical ocean.

"Off who, a security guard?" Will gives Hannibal a stern look that he doesn't see because his eyes are closed.

Sleepily he replies, "A man traveling anonymously on his own. He was ideal. Your hands are cold."

"Then help me warm them," Will mumbles.

He flattens his fingers along the offended flesh. Hannibal winces slightly and turns his body so he can face Will and slips his arm about Will's back. His fingers graze Will's shirt lazily and lightly tickle him where the material rustles against his skin. He probably makes the motion so Will won't be able to touch the tender skin anymore as it forces the bruise to align neatly with Will's chest, but he'll take what he can get. He's always enjoyed being wrapped around or wrapped up in Hannibal. He fights back a yawn and presses his face against Will's throat.

"You were outside in only these meager clothes, weren't you?"

Will skirts the question and asks instead, "When do you want me to wake you?"

"In an hour, I think."

"Okay."

Will snakes his left arm around Hannibal's waist and glances briefly at the clock behind him on the bed side table. It's more than a little appropriate that they would use their last bit of time together this way.

"Will they move me after they've processed me?"

"Perhaps," Hannibal murmurs, the minute tension in his shoulders easing. "Were you thinking to escape?"

“You haven’t really explained to me why we can’t run in the first place.”

Hannibal nuzzles him slightly, just slightly, with his cheek. Will accepts the silent request to shift onto his back so that Hannibal might stretch himself out more comfortably along the side of Will’s body. He still can’t reach the bruise with the angle, but he can see the very edges of it around the curve of his armpit.

“A guilty man runs, Will.” Hannibal’s breath puffs in warm bursts at the hollow of his throat. “An innocent man also runs, but his escape does nothing to help him.”

Pondering back to the transport vehicle Gideon broke out of, Will muses, “I know exactly how to get around them, no matter what they do to keep me chained up.” He waits, but Hannibal only breathes steadily at his shoulder. He may have fallen asleep. He adds, softly in case Hannibal has drifted off, “You’ve been molding me, but Jack’s been molding me, too, even if he never knew it.” He whispers, “He’ll know it soon enough.”

Hannibal moves just slightly in his sleep and pulls a little bit on Will’s shirt. Other than that, he is still. His eyelashes flutter against Will’s cheek, perhaps half-aware of what Will has said. He slurs, sounding quaintly intoxicated, “Does it bother you that Jack will take the credit for your transformation?”

“Does it bother you?”

Hannibal shrugs a very small amount and huffs a long, slow sigh. “For all that it wounds him, his martyrdom will protect me.”

“Do you like that you’ll have that effect on him?”

Though it obviously vexes him to do so, Hannibal levels Will with a blank glance before settling in again at the juncture of Will’s neck and shoulder. He says, “I am utterly indifferent to his suffering. The calculated nature of his misery amuses me, but the pain itself…” Hannibal trails off. Will fancies he can hear Hannibal stifling another yawn. “His pain is neither beautiful nor displeasing to my eyes.”

Will ponders his words for a moment, and Hannibal, perhaps sensing that Will might ask more of him, interjects, “Might I sleep now, Will?”

He hums once and answers, “Yeah, go ahead.”

Hannibal goes magnificently slack against Will’s side and takes that coveted sleep Will has bereft him of several times already in the span of this single morning. When Hannibal has been out for a considerable amount of time, Will slips his arm out from between his and Hannibal’s bodies and insinuates it behind Hannibal’s back so he can hold onto him as he sleeps. He used to be quite a light sleeper around Will, but that aspect of him had melted away as they grew nearer to each other. Will quite enjoys the privilege. He would revel in exploiting it, but motive and opportunity had never struck him at the same time and so he never had.

He doesn't know what sort of tricks he might have played on Hannibal if he had ever felt the need to use the obvious weaknesses he'd learned of the man against him. He had enough information to do considerable damage. He'll have enough time now to come up with plenty of devious, evil things.

The first move he plans to make once the opportunity presents itself is to show Hannibal, Jack, and everyone that he can, in fact, be that monster that they will come to know him as, if only for a short while. He means to escape from the transport vehicle and find Hannibal before sweeping him away if only to show that they could run if they put their minds to it. It would work brilliantly, actually. Jack would buy it; he would believe Will capable of stealing Hannibal away and making a break for it with the last person to which he felt he could turn.

Hannibal squeezes at his ribcage in his sleep, an unconscious twitch of his digits. Will reaches for that hand and threads their fingers together, and Hannibal's fingers go perfectly still against his knuckles. He had observed long ago that Hannibal took great pride in his ability to steady Will with a mere touch; had delighted in it so much, Will noted with immense pleasure, that he failed to notice Will had been coaxing and cultivating that same reaction out of Hannibal all the while.

Soundlessly, Will whispers, "Give me your hand, you beautiful and tender form. I am a friend and come not to punish. Be of good cheer. I am not fierce."

Hannibal doesn't stir when Will squeezes his fingers gently. His heart beats leisurely against Will's, and it would be so maddeningly easy to kill him. Will brushes his lips along Hannibal's hair. He breathes, "Softly shall you sleep in my arms."

Always softly and never with fear, Will corrects. He scents Hannibal's hair, having comfortably adopted the habit, and swallows. He revises, grudgingly, *Not maddeningly easy and only if I had to.*

Each man's game might always have been to capture the other, but damned if they hadn't each been equally tamed and caught in turn.

The time comes for Will to wake Hannibal from his sleep, so he does, taking great care to be gentle with his bruises. Hannibal appears to be much restored by his rest, though his hair has the look of a man ravaged and debauched. Will, of course, adores the image and runs his fingers through it, which Hannibal allows, grumbling slightly with his sleep-touched throat. He hums and pushes up gingerly to sit on his knees, shirtless and in only his shorts beside Will on his bed. The noonday sun shines in through the window a pale blue with the cloud cover.

Will would like to hold Hannibal and sleep forever. He would like to scream because he can't.

Hannibal mumbles with gravel in his throat, "I will call Jack Crawford then."

"Get dressed first, and I'll make coffee," Will murmurs as he sits up to be at eye level with Hannibal. "You're not ready to have a real conversation right now."

Hannibal nods and leans forward on one hand to press a close-mouthed kiss to Will's bottom lip. They hold for a moment, not moving but expressing and communicating everything in that stalled moment of purposeful inaction. Hannibal slips out of bed and meanders heavily into the hallway, and Will follows wordlessly with his eyes before going the opposite way to the kitchen.

He sets to making coffee enough for two, staring at the coffee maker Hannibal brought home with him several weeks ago with passive aggressive hatred. He presses the power button, and it sinks in that he has no idea what will happen to his possessions while he is away; he has no idea how long it will be before he can come back if Hannibal really knows of a way to get him back at all.

Hannibal emerges from the hallway a while later, hair combed and suit pressed at all the right corners. Will always sought to discover how Hannibal managed it and what he would do if that luxury was ever taken from him, but he could never secure a straight answer when he came close to asking.

Will pours him his cup of coffee and then works on his own. He makes them both black with one sugar.

"What are you going to tell Jack?"

"Some semblance of the truth will have to suffice."

He sips primly at his coffee and sits with Will at the table. Fenris nudges at Hannibal's ankle once before flopping down into a sated heap of white fur at his feet. Will takes a long draught from his mug and sighs, gaze fixed on Winston resting his head on his thigh.

"Please don't put them in a kennel," he whispers. His hand drops down to touch Winston's ear and scratch the curved length of protected skull at the base and behind it.

"I will find them new homes if I must, Will."

"Thank you," he mumbles, dropping his head into his hands and scratching at his scalp lightly. He nods a few times and takes another drink of his coffee. Hannibal's hand finds its way to the knee closest to him not currently occupied by his concerned dog. He does nothing to actively stall for time but doesn't give Hannibal his attention either.

After a complacent moment of silence, Hannibal murmurs lowly, "How silly to think about it, what pure omen, what a definitive kiss to bury in the heart, to yield in the origins of helplessness and intelligence, soft and safe upon the eternally troubled waters?"

The verse jogs a buried memory out of Will like pain conjured out of an old, healed wound. His hand pulses at the center craving for the harsh bite of a blade or a reparative needle.

Hannibal continues, clearly reciting from a poem he expects Will to be at least partially familiar with, "What vital, rapid wings of a new angel of dreams to lay upon my sleeping shoulders for perpetual safety, in such a way that the road among the stars of death shall be a violent flight begun many days and months and centuries ago?"

It calls to his eyes the faded image of corpses carved into visceral angels. It calls to mind that flare of anger with which Will had allowed himself to lash at Jack when Hannibal had tried to turn Will against him.

“Perhaps the natural weakness of suspicious and anxious beings suddenly seeks permanence in time and limits on earth,” Hannibal goes on without any difficulty at all in remembering the words. “Perhaps the tediums and the ages implacably accumulated extend like the lunar wave of an ocean nearly created upon shores and lands grievously deserted.”

They had done this before with a very different poem when Hannibal had first explained to Will what they would do to leave this comfortable life behind them and why. They had recited the poem together in turns. Will notes with the slight pauses in between each line and each stanza that Hannibal is giving Will the chance to fill in the empty spaces as he wishes, but Will doesn’t know the words or even who wrote it. He suspects it might be the same author from last time. It would certainly make more sense if it were.

Will glances up at Hannibal and catches him watching his hand on Will’s knee. He slips his hand over Hannibal’s fingers and holds. He doesn’t know what for, but he feels grounded holding on, and Hannibal reacts in a similar way, even if he does try to hide it. When he composes himself to his satisfaction, Hannibal brings his eyes up to Will’s and pins him there in place.

“Ah, let what I am go on existing and ceasing to exist, and let my obedience be ordered with such iron conditions that the tremor of deaths and of births will not trouble the deep place that I wish to keep for myself eternally.”

He leans in a ways, and Will closes the distance to steal that kiss that always belonged to him.

Hannibal licks at Will’s lips and sighs when Will lets him in. That mouth, the tongue within it, and the lexicon it could produce were crafted for Will. Whatever hiccup in evolution, twist of fate, or dangerous curiosity of a deity or deities had brought them together they had not been built to be anything but instruments for their counterparts. Will had a choice once; it wasn’t that he couldn’t have decided for himself.

He had been presented with two options equally tantalizing and damning: give Hannibal up or go with him willingly.

It had not been forced on him. Hannibal had not coerced him, though he would have loved to think he had.

He tilts his head enough that their lips separate, and he says, “Let what I am, then, be, in some place and in every time, an established and assured and ardent witness, carefully destroying himself and preserving himself incessantly, clearly insistent upon his original duty.”

Inferring from this isolated type of silence that the poem has concluded, Will asks, “Neruda?”

“Yes, Will.”

“What is that one called?”

“It Means Shadows,” he replies evenly. His eyes glisten but not with tears. He looks vaguely excited.

Will smiles, meaning it. “Apt.”

“Shall I call Jack Crawford?”

“Yes.”

He watches Hannibal stroll guardedly out of the room, hand resting again on Winston’s head. He ruffles the fur at the dog’s neck and moves to go into his bedroom and get dressed. It hardly matters what he throws on since it’ll all be stripped away from him once Jack takes him into custody, but he must wear something, pointless as it feels.

He stands in the backyard in his shoes and jacket this time and watches the dogs sniff and wander. Hands in his pockets, he doesn’t move as Hannibal comes to approach him from behind.

Hannibal killed Lass that way. Will had heard all about it back when Hannibal found himself in that phase of excitable companionship that he had always tried to conceal because it embarrassed him to be so thoughtlessly open. Will never prodded at him for it because it was new to him, too. He had never had someone around who really saw into him and wasn’t afraid or cautious but knew just how to push so that it didn’t hurt or frighten Will when he did.

The same had started to happen for Hannibal, too, after a while, and of course, that particular shift in their relationship had scared the hell out of him. It scared Will, too. They probably came close to killing each other at least a dozen times every other week.

Hannibal reaches out, unseen, and grips Will’s shoulder with one strong hand. They hold like that for some time before turning and walking around the side of the house to stand together on the porch. Their hands stay in their jacket pockets, but their shoulders touch, and that pressure alone keeps him from running. It is proof that Hannibal is real and that he might someday live inside of Will’s bones and breathe beneath his skin; proof that they might one day run and hunt and be free together with Abigail safe, breathing, and happy somehow.

Hannibal’s stands resolutely at Will’s side until the cars come one after another down the quiet, idyllic road emerging from the trees and toward his home. His weight stays firm and unmoved at Will’s shoulder like an auxiliary appendage until the moment Jack leads Will away from him down the driveway and into one of those waiting cars with the engine still idling.

He looks out the window and sees Hannibal’s face as if he were gazing at a dramatist glimpsed only briefly from behind a carefully composed mask. His mouth is turned down slightly in a pronounced frown, and his brow holds the shape of a man seconds from falling apart. It is not a face that belongs to Hannibal. It looks a bit like Will, really.

Beverly consoles Hannibal uncertainly and he crumbles, turning away and holding his knuckles to a quivering mouth. It's a perfect charade, and even Will believes the tears. Mostly it's because he wants them to be real.

But pain doesn't interest Hannibal; not Jack's pain, not Will's pain, and not his own.

Distantly, a voice in the back of Will's mind summons Abigail's name for query. He wonders if he will ever see her again. He wonders if she would want to see him again.

Winston watches him from just outside, confused. Will stares back, helpless and at a loss.

When this chaos is finished, Will would like never to feel that way again. He throws Hannibal a final glance and sees not the mournful stranger but the calculating murderer, cannibal, and master of all that Will is. He risks a smile, and Hannibal rewards him with a slight twitch of his lips.

"Endings are just beginnings," he tells himself under his breath. He rubs at his thumb idly and rests his head on the window as he forces his mind to go blank. "Endings are just beginnings."

And all I ever need is a hand free.

Chapter End Notes

Urbain Grandier from *The Devils of Loudon* by Aldous Huxley

Der Tod Und Das Mädchen by Franz Schubert

It Means Shadows from *Residence on Earth* by the captor and champion of my heart, Pablo Neruda

Love Me Two Times

Chapter Summary

Will goes out with a bang.

Chapter Notes

Love me one time/I could not speak/Love me one time, baby/Yeah, my knees got weak/But love me two times, girl/Last me all through the week/Love me two times/I'm goin' away

Bottom Hannibal featuring in this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal sits in his office writing in his patients' files that have amassed over the past week. He has feigned, quite excellently, a heartsick grief at the loss paired with Will's arrest, and the leaning stack of paperwork, as a result, has climbed to an impressive height on his desk. It hasn't been especially difficult, if he's being honest. He wishes Abigail's escape had been cleaner; he wishes he and Will could have escaped along with her.

The time for their escape would come soon enough if they played their cards right. If Abigail could find it in herself to survive this second taunting of Sheol, if Will could find it in himself to engineer the precise undoing of the men who put him in chains, and if Hannibal could remain hidden in the meantime, they could win yet.

He does have a plan for their freedom; he and Will have a plan. They only need to keep from turning on each other until they can execute it, together.

Hannibal sighs and re-reads the open patient file a fourth time before dropping it on the desk. He presses the heels of his hands gently over his eyes and sets it back in the pile of unread manila folders. The next one in the stack, thankfully shorter than that of the files he has read already, belongs to Cora Armistead. He slips that one out from under its horridly dull neighbor and flips it open. He would have expected the woman's file to be much thicker with excerpts from Anson Huxley's trial or police statements from the day the authorities found them in Connecticut.

He has been through the little information collected over the course of her stay at Port Haven, but each time he returns to the file, he expects so much more than what he sees. He knows the answers already and how to guide her back into the light. The time wasted and the opportunities missed at the fault of inadequacy irritate him.

On the whole, he can't be moved out of his current state of aloofness. Abigail's wish was for him to take care of Cora, grant her with that freedom he had prematurely promised to Abigail.

Here they were covering their tracks, beasts hunted by fools whose only advantages were their makeshift weapons that rendered them stronger and more powerful—but only for now, only until they could regroup again. It became clear to Hannibal these few days in Will's absence that they had all taken in strays on their journey to this moment where they found themselves separated by other people, physical space, and circumstance; separated by evidence.

They bore so much of it in terms of bodies; a severed arm, a stolen ear, a halfway amputated tongue, a child.

Cora Armistead's file doesn't offer much in the way of assistance as he skims through it. Hannibal read the news reports, studied Huxley's profile, and even did a preliminary analysis of their son, Noah, based on the child's podiatrist and the grandmother's psych evaluation.

Hers is a great and terrible tragedy masked in so many dulled edges. He could see it even if everyone else fell for the trap, clever as it was and remains to be. Cora Armistead had been a child still when she broke Anson Huxley's world to ensure her future, and the charade had never fallen out of place. It had always served to protect her, the inconvenience of incarceration aside. Her present imprisonment in Port Haven is nothing short of incarceration, though the wardens keeping her are much more lenient than would be assigned to watch her in a real penitentiary.

Cora knew that, of course. Abigail knew it, too.

Hannibal closes her file and stands to go to the window. He stares outside, and for all that he feels lost, he can't root himself enough in its chaos to understand what it means or why his hands clutch emptily in his pockets. There is chaos inside him, ugly and fatuous and completely irrepressible. It varies from the chaos with which he usually finds himself imbibed but in a way that gives him no reprieve.

His cell phone buzzes on his desk, and he stares at the blinking device complacently before answering on the sixth ring. The first noise he hears is dogs barking excitedly, and then Alana speaks.

“Will was just here.”

A cold spike of something shoots down between his shoulder blades and rests in his chest, warming and glowing with light and curious pride. Will did say something about an escape, about knowing how to break free if anyone tried to contain him.

“Have you called Jack?”

“I wanted you to know first in case he tries to go to you,” she says in a rush. The dogs won’t stop barking in the background. “I texted him, but he’ll—he’s calling me, Hannibal. I have to go.”

And then the line falls silent. Hannibal sets his phone back on his desk and returns to the windows to draw the curtains closed. He runs a hand down the coarse, light-obstructing fabric and breathes around his nerves, around that jolting feeling like quick currents of electricity just behind his ribs. Hannibal closes his eyes and smiles, detecting that shift of scent in the air.

“You did it,” Hannibal muses softly, turning to see Will standing with his elbows on the rail of the mezzanine. His face is blank. He didn’t hear Hannibal’s first words to him.

“People often lurk in the shadows for you when you get off work, doctor?”

“In my experience, yes.” Hannibal steps around to the front of his desk. “Are you going to come down?”

Looking around, Will says distractedly, “It’s a bit higher up than a pedestal, isn’t it?”

“Quite.” Hannibal takes a few more cautious steps, curious as to whether Will might jump or whether he’ll try to harm Hannibal once he’s descended to his level. “They found your lures, I presume?”

“You would’ve thought Jack was pleased,” Will mumbles, picking at the sleeve of his orange prison jumpsuit. “A slam dunk like that, the evidence right there and the motive—” he laughs darkly, “the motive, God. Garrett Jacob Hobbs is dead, but he’ll outlive me, I swear.” He shakes his head, looking and sounding more apathetic than anything else.

“Will,” Hannibal calls gently. It takes a moment, but Will gives him his attention. “Please come down from there.”

As if something about the softness of Hannibal’s polite request stirs him to wakefulness, Will nods and turns to take the ladder. Hannibal presses his hand to the small of Will’s back as he nears the ground and keeps his hand there as Will steps off onto the floor. He twists in Hannibal’s loose grip and leans back against the ladder, trapping Hannibal’s hand behind his back not uncomfortably. He can’t tell immediately if it’s done with the intention of keeping

him bound to this spot with Will or if it is merely a casual expression of tired relief. Will does look relieved. Hannibal imagines he has had a difficult few days. The orange makes Will's complexion look sallow and unhealthy.

Will is far better suited to gray and blue tones, the occasional green serving him just as nicely —colors that could be attributed to a river or the sea just before the dawn dyed everything in red. Hannibal likes him best in black, rare as it is for Will to dress himself in such a way unless Hannibal picks his clothes for him. He hadn't gotten to do that quite as often as he had hoped he would, unfortunately.

He touches the starched collar of the jumpsuit with some distaste. It isn't until Will sighs softly that Hannibal realizes he has been avoiding Will's eyes. He swallows reflexively and returns the calculating, curious glance with which Will is gifting him.

"Now what?"

"We will go to Minnesota."

"Jesus, again," Will grumbles tiredly. "That's a hell of a drive."

"Yes, Will."

"I can't go wearing this."

"Half of my closet is yours," Hannibal states, matching Will for his tone as if this is just another tedious conversation about whose turn it is to go for groceries. "We will make a stop."

Will's eyes drift toward Hannibal's desk. He eases off the rungs of the ladder to free Hannibal's hand from beneath his back, and propels Hannibal backwards onto its surface. He hears half the files topple over onto the floor and inadvertently loses his footing. Will holds him down so that Hannibal's back presses into the mahogany of the desk. Will's face hasn't changed; his eyes have not flickered. He removes one of his hands from Hannibal's shoulder to calmly, intentionally push the lamp off over the edge. It crashes in a brief cacophony of shattering glass and trembling filament. The noise settles, and Will stares, eyes dark and worn from torment that doesn't even touch him now. His pupils are blown wide.

"They'll think you tried to save me," Will whispers. "But you know what I've discovered?" His eyes glint dangerously in the subdued light of the vast room. He licks his lips. "I never needed saving." His free hand sneaks up past Hannibal's tie, and he traces the outline of his suprasternal notch through his pressed shirt. "I needed ruin." Hannibal moves his legs slightly, and Will insinuates himself in between his thighs naturally, comfortably. He breathes, "You always knew, didn't you?"

"I suspected as much," Hannibal says when he finds he can speak around the burbling heat building in his belly. "I hoped."

Will breathes evenly above him and loosens his hold so Hannibal can sit up properly. He manages to slide down to the edge of the desk, but Will doesn't move back far enough to

allow him to get his feet solidly underneath him again. Will touches Hannibal's throat with two fingers, non-dominant hand dangling at his side.

Hannibal takes that wrist in his hand and assesses the predictable damage done to the injured thumb. He rubs careful circles into the swollen skin stretched over the joint that connects the metacarpal to the proximal phalange.

"Let me find you a splint for this," he suggests quietly, waiting for Will to step aside of his own volition before trying to get passed him any other way. Will lets him go behind his desk and search briefly through the drawers for the box of tongue depressors he keeps for the odd occasion when he needs them. He procures one such depressor and a roll of medical tape from a neighboring drawer. Hannibal approaches Will again where he has taken to sitting on the corner of the desk and lines the makeshift splint up with the broken digit.

"We have to stop meeting like this," Will murmurs. Hannibal looks up and finds a worn smirk on Will's lips. "You putting me back together, I mean."

Hannibal quirks a small, teasing smile of his own and muses, "People will say we're in love."

"People say that anyway," Will counters.

"Do they?" Hannibal wraps the tape around the base of Will's thumb and across the back of his hand. "I suppose we're in part to blame for that."

"In part?" Will lifts a dark eyebrow.

"People will always speak at length about things they don't understand. That what they spread happened to be true in this instance is only a portion of our doing."

Will falls silent and doesn't move as Hannibal finishes his splint. Hannibal hands him his overcoat to hide the bulk of the screaming orange fabric from the scrutinizing eyes of the public, and they go out together through the discreet patients' exit. Will keeps one hand braced on Hannibal's arm, less to prevent him from running and more to keep himself moving in the right direction, the only direction he has left.

The drive back to Hannibal's house is relatively simple. Will doesn't speak or shuffle at his side in the passenger's seat. It occurs to Hannibal that he left his cell phone on his desk as they're pulling out of the parking lot into traffic. It's probably for the best, though they might be in trouble later if the car breaks down at some point in their travels.

He chooses not to linger on the thought. If they are discovered that way, so be it. Will only set out to prove that he could run if he made it his goal to run; how far he got would be irrelevant as he didn't mean to run for long.

They make it to Hannibal's house without incident, no police cars swarming the neighborhood or sirens sounding from afar. Will walks with Hannibal up the steps and slips inside. He waits to remove the overcoat until the door closes behind them. He sets it neatly on the rack in the foyer without needing to be told how to do it so the sides don't wrinkle.

Will goes upstairs without preamble, and Hannibal follows up after him, briefly checking his watch for the time. The seconds count down.

Hannibal watches him step out of his shoes and shed the offensive prison uniform from the edge of his bed. He sits, blankly cataloguing the deep blue plaid shirt Will selects and the ordinary slacks. Will averts his eyes to Hannibal's as he's stepping in with one leg and halts, a curious emotion befalling his face like he has just realized where they are and the fragility this encounter holds. He drops the bundle of clothes messily held in his arms to stride toward the bed and crouch in front of Hannibal. He grabs hold of the back of Hannibal's head and brings him down for a searing kiss. Will forces Hannibal's shoes and socks from his feet before unbuttoning and pushing the clothes off his body.

Will pauses for a moment as if to ask if this is okay, but Hannibal pulls Will up onto the bed as he's inching back to quash whatever question Will may have invented in his mind about the nature of this their final chance to be together in this way. Hannibal struggles to kick out of his slacks and scrambles inelegantly in the drawer for the necessary preparatory items. He gives Will a condom and lubricant, thinking ahead to the clean-up and knowing they won't have time to shower afterward. They don't have time for this coupling as it is, but neither can they let this opportunity go to waste.

Hannibal lies back, and lets Will's fingers slip into his body, smooth and careful and dexterous the way he always has been but for the typical onslaught of nerves with which he finds himself assaulted. His hands are steady, and perhaps for the adrenaline that spikes through him at having so little time to get away with this excursion, the arousal pooled in his gut stings and stifles him. Hannibal groans around it and blinks the sweat out of his eye as he rolls his hips down into that heated, throbbing sensation pulling at all of his consciousness and burning his skin everywhere. Will pants against his thigh, lips wet and warm.

He glances up at Hannibal and taps purposefully with his fingers so that Hannibal's body bows and sparks, and Hannibal feels half mad being suspended over that perilous cliff inside himself. It's more than sex because it's always more than sex. Will bears down on that spot again, and Hannibal swears violently, hands clutching at the pillow behind his head and swinging it savagely over Will's head.

Will is calmed down enough from his passion and from the darkness of his mind that he can laugh at Hannibal's meandering gibberish. He thinks he probably called Will a torturous waterfowl or something equally incoherent and animal-based as his first language demands.

He thinks Will would make a joke if they weren't quite so pressed for time, but as it is, he merely tends to speedily preparing himself and positioning himself over Hannibal. He reconsiders before pressing into him and maneuvers Hannibal's leg up over his shoulder and smiling softly at Hannibal's flexibility. He has never quite gotten over the novelty of it. Hannibal bends his other knee to box Will in and waits for the breach that short circuits his brain for the first few seconds until Will brings himself to rest as far as their bodies allow.

Hannibal winds his arms about Will's neck and shoulders and urges him to move, so he does. He closes his eyes and lets the push and pull, the syncopation, the sounds Will makes when he takes the dominant role without necessarily asserting his dominance wash over him like individual sections of an orchestra coordinating to create music. Hannibal lays his head back,

eyes drifting open, totally relaxed and present and focused. He looks at Will and discovers the culmination of this thing they have nurtured and grown together displayed in the beautiful curve of Will's bitten lips and in his lucid, seeing eyes. He smiles around a soft laugh and presses more sinuously against Hannibal's body. He arches his back in turn and threads his fingers into Will's hair.

Will drops his head and worships Hannibal's trapezium muscle with his mouth, his shoulder blades jutting out sharply like two mountainous ridges across the smooth, alabaster prairie of his back. Hannibal slides his arm beneath Will's to map out Will's lower back with his hands and feel the muscles twitch and flex beneath his probing fingers. Another shock of hot pleasure courses up his spine. Will doesn't relent, actively drawing moans and breathless cries out of Hannibal's throat that he tastes on his tongue with enthusiasm.

A sharp, surprised groan spirits out of Will as he fumbles with his good hand to touch Hannibal and bring him off in time with his own orgasm. The timing isn't quite right and Will comes apart before Hannibal can follow him over that blissful edge, body tensing and shivering through the unexpected assault to his senses. Hannibal accepts it for the beautiful shared experience that it is and holds Will against his throat as they gasp and pant through and into each other's sweating bodies.

Will only takes a moment to compose himself before slithering down Hannibal's body to take him into his mouth and resolve the problem of his unmet pleasure. His mouth is hot and closing around him when the arousal pinching in Hannibal's stomach tightens and quivers with release.

Hannibal sighs softly and lies still for a moment until Will presses a light kiss to his bare knee and shimmies off the bed to get back into his clothes. Hannibal follows woozily after. Will helps him with buttoning up his shirt as it takes him much less time than Hannibal on average to get dressed. They stand there in the bedroom smelling of sex and adrenaline. Hannibal steps back to adjust the covers on the bed as Will skips out of the room into the hallway and down the stairs. He removes the gun from Hannibal's coat pocket and shrugs on his own jacket left hanging on the rack in the foyer. Hannibal tosses him the keys, and they go back out to the car.

The proper authorities still haven't found them, it would seem. Hannibal doesn't relax into his seat until they make it passed Westminster and it becomes clear Jack hasn't caught their trail just yet. Will notices Hannibal's deflated posture and switches on the radio. Hannibal watches Will's hand recede from the dial to the wheel. He catches the song playing right at the beginning, and Hannibal's heart clenches around the opening notes from the strings.

Andrea Bocelli sings, "Quando sono solo sogno all'orizzonte e mancan le parole. Sì, lo so che non c'è luce in una stanza quando manca il sole. Se non ci sei tu con me, con me. Su le finestre mostra a tutti il mio cuore che hai acceso, chiudi dentro me la luce che hai incontrato per strada."

Will doesn't appear to recognize the song until the identifiable namesake of the song makes its appearance: "Con te partirò."

Will jerks out of his thoughts and stares at the radio, confused. He swerves back into his lane when a few cars begin honking at him as he steers the car in steadily into its proper lane. He steals a glance at Hannibal before turning his eyes back to the road.

“Paesi che non ho mai veduto e vissuto con te, adesso si li vivrò. Con te partirò su navi per mari che, io lo so, no, no, non esistono più. Con te partirò.”

Hannibal listens absently to the song and watches the scenery as it rises and dissolves the farther they drive on. He shifts slightly in his seat, legs sore from the stretch Will had instigated of them and everything else sore for varying reasons. He watches Will out of the corner of his eye and maps out his features by memory as the drums continue in their marching beat.

He imagines that paradise Will had made entirely by accident of rain, music, and fireworks. He tries to see Abigail in a beautiful white dress and unscarred, unwounded. He tries to see her happy and free, giving him to Will that they might, the three of them, be one.

“Con te io li rivivrò. Con te partirò su navi per mari che, io lo so, no, no, non esistono più, con te io li rivivrò. Con te partirò. Io con te.”

The cities morph and disappear as the late gray morning shifts into stained pink afternoon with the approaching sunset. Right about when they reach Akron five hours into the drive, they need to stop for gas. Hannibal pays in cash and fills up the tank while Will ambles from the driver’s seat over into the passenger seat and settles with his head against the window. Hannibal thinks they can make it to Chicago before they need to stop for the night, if Will gives his consent to stop at all, which he very well may not.

Hannibal slides back into the car and off they go. Will lasts about ten minutes before he starts squirming. It’s pretty impressive they lasted as long as they did without resorting to trivial car games.

Will sighs and asks, “Twenty questions?”

Hannibal gives him a slightly pleading look. Will just shrugs as if to say, *It’s this or I sing to you.*

“If we must,” Hannibal relents, forcing his hands to relax on the steering wheel.

“Are you thinking of something?”

“Yes, go.”

Will smirks to himself in his seat and chuckles softly, evidently pleased with himself. He decides this drive will be worse than the time Will fed Hannibal strawberries and purposely got the juice all over his face. They had killed Parish by that point, and Hannibal was still in the process of repenting for his concealing Will’s encephalitis, so he hadn’t retaliated or ever planned to. It had also led to a particularly ravishing time on the sofa, so perhaps he should just be patient now as he was then. They don’t have the time to squabble over something inconsequential, so he humors Will lest they spend this time bickering instead.

He asks, “Is it a living thing?”

Hannibal shakes his head and clarifies, “No.”

“Does it make music?”

Will is smirking when Hannibal turns to look at him. He says, “Yes.”

“Is it your harpsichord?”

Hannibal makes a face out the windshield. Will snickers and laughs outright when Hannibal grudgingly says, “Yes.”

“You’re easy,” he sings playfully. “You want to do me?” He wags his eyebrows when Hannibal glances his way, and he can’t readily turn down a challenge after having been easily beaten, so he huffs and grumbles something in the affirmative. “All right.” Will rubs his hands together and says, “I got it. Go.”

“Can it move of its own free will?” The answer is no. Will says it in such a way that Hannibal expands his question to a wider selection of objects rather than move onto the next guess. “Is it a machine?”

“Yes.”

Hannibal sees Will narrows his eyes at him in his peripheral vision. “Does it fit in your hand?”

“Yes.”

“Would you find it in the kitchen?” Will doesn’t answer. Hannibal asks, “Does it make a noise when you use it?”

“Yes.”

“You’re thinking of the electric can opener.” Hannibal grins at Will’s frown and laughs airily. “Take your turn if you wish.”

They go on like that, competitively, until they begin to think up exceedingly complex objects and Will grows tired of the game. He stumps Hannibal on the Genetti Hotel of all places, and Hannibal gets him with the Hobbs’ Cabin, which he takes especially hard given the context of the drive. They’re taking Interstate 80 through Toledo when Will suggests something called Complete the Rhyme. Hannibal merges onto the 90 and listens to Will explain the rules.

“It goes like this: I give you two words as a hint and you have to come up with a rhyme made up of two synonyms for the first two words. So if I said something like, cheek-bird. What would you say?”

Hannibal furrows his eyebrows and says, “Jowl, fowl?”

“Yeah, like that, perfect.”

Hannibal must look unimpressed at the prospect because Will says, “You didn’t want to play twenty questions either, and that turned out better than I thought it would. All right, you know what, geography. We’ll do geography: Cleveland.”

Hannibal sighs and says, “Dumfries.”

“Syracuse.”

“Estonia.”

“Albuquerque.” Will slumps into his seat. “Your uncle hasn’t called you?”

“Edinburgh,” Hannibal murmurs. “No, he has not.”

“Hanover. I figured you would’ve said something if he had.”

“Rochefort.” Hannibal switches lanes. “Abigail is in good hands.”

“Tripoli.”

“Italy,” Hannibal says.

“Yuma.” Will rubs at his face with his hands and takes a deep breath. “What did you say to them, to make them help?”

“Arkansas. I told them Abigail would die if they did nothing. I told them she was innocent.”

“She’s not, though; innocent.” Hannibal keeps his eyes steadfastly on the road. “Ah, Shreveport.”

“Tuscany.”

Will chews on his lip. “Yorkshire. You don’t know where they’re taking her?”

“Maybe to London, maybe to their home in France; I really don’t know, Will.” A short silence fills the car as Will switches the radio off.

“What if she’s not okay? Your aunt threatened to take…all of this, what you have left.”

“I don’t doubt that she would if Abigail took a turn. We must believe that she will survive as she always has.”

“But if she isn’t,” he persists quietly. Hannibal looks to find Will staring back at him intently. “If Abigail doesn’t make it, if I cut her too deep—I…God, if she dies because of me, Hannibal…” His breath catches in his throat, and he turns to watch out the window.

Hannibal stays on the course. Chicago is nearly four hours away yet. They must keep moving to make it there by nightfall. He slides his hand over Will’s knee, the only support he can extend while driving.

“We promised her freedom, Will, and she will have it. She will be all right.”

Will squeezes his hand and leans back decisively in his seat. He rests his head on the window and closes his eyes. He doesn’t protest when Hannibal takes his hand away to hold the wheel again, but he does switch the radio back on. It plays softly over the dull roar of the interstate beneath the tires. Hannibal tunes in to the music every now and again but mostly watches the road. Will sleeps beside him peacefully. They get through Elkhart before Will starts to fuss in his slumber. He doesn’t say anything that Hannibal can understand, but he calms down when Hannibal firmly touches his shoulder and gives him a gentle shake.

Chicago is two hours away when Hannibal takes an exit ramp and goes through an unmemorable drive-thru to get food for him and Will. The sky is deep red over the horizon where the sun has set halfway when he wakes Will. They eat leaning on the trunk of Hannibal’s car in the empty lot. Hannibal teaches him to say, *Aš suìrtite suirùtė.*

I dismantle the chaos.

He teaches Will the Lithuanian words for egotists, philanthropists, and firstborn. Hannibal tells him *pramuštgalvis* when he asks how to say adventurer.

He asks softly, “How do I say cannibal?”

“Either kanibalas or žmogėdra.”

“Zhamog—” He laughs and sips at his drink. “Zhum…no, that’s not right. I’m butchering it.”

Hannibal tilts his chin up at Will and says the world slowly: “Zhmogedra.” Will watches his lips form the word and swallows. Hannibal says it again, “Žmogėdra.”

“Žmogėdra,” Will repeats. He shakes his head and says instead, “Tu kanibalas.”

“Esames kanibalai, Will; both of us.”

Will sighs softly, rested from his sleep and energized from the food in his belly, though it isn’t good food.

“It was always going to be this way,” Will says. He balls up his and Hannibal’s trash and deposits it in the receptacle several feet off. He comes back to Hannibal, and his features are calm, even cheerful. His voice becomes sentimental. “We never did go to Great Falls Park. Think we will someday?”

Hannibal touches his hair and stands up straight. He gives Will’s splint a quick once-over before answering, “I don’t know what the future holds.”

“Freedom.” Will swallows hard, leaning just so into Hannibal’s hand. “Freedom and family. It’s all you ever wanted, isn’t it?”

“I wanted power once.”

“Not anymore?”

“I took all that was to be had from my enemies,” Hannibal explains softly. “Here I have taken it twice now from Jack first with Lass and now with you, though that is incidental.”

“You don’t want it, and yet.” Will walks around to the driver’s side door. Hannibal pats his pockets, but Will is already starting the car. He waits for Hannibal to get in and then brings them back onto I-80. “You know, if you had just settled down somewhere and built yourself a traditional, creational family, maybe this all could have been avoided.”

“I chose you, Will.”

“Yes, you did.” Will nods. “And I chose you, and we’re cannibals and Abigail’s a cannibal.”

“Her father was a cannibal,” Hannibal says dismissively. “Chicago is two hours out from here. We can stop for the night, unless you would prefer to drive through the night?”

“I don’t want Jack to beat us to the house.”

“In that case, wake me when my turn comes to take the wheel.” Hannibal eases his shoulders against the seat and holds his neck straight so he hopefully won’t get a crick in it while he sleeps.

Will murmurs, “Okay, Ixion.”

Hannibal shoots him a single amused glance before closing his eyes and relaxing into the lowly playing music on the radio. Sleep tugs at the corners of his consciousness as Nessun Dorma begins to play softly as if heard through the murky barrier of water.

“Nessun dorma! Nessun dorma! Tu pure, o, Principessa, nella tua fredda stanza, guardi le stelle che tremano d'amore e di speranza.”

No one shall sleep! No one shall sleep! Even you, o Princess, in your cold room, watch the stars that tremble with love and with hope.

“Ma il mio mistero è chiuso in me, il nome mio nessun saprà! No, no, sulla tua bocca lo dirò quando la luce splenderà! Ed il mio bacio scioglierà il silenzio che ti fa mia!

But my secret is hidden within me. My name no one shall know. No, no, on your mouth I will tell it when the light shines. And my kiss will dissolve the silence that makes you mine!

“Il nome suo nessun saprà! E noi dovrem, ahime, morir!”

No one will know his name and we must, alas, die.

“Dilegua, o notte! Tramontate, stelle! Tramontate, stelle! All'alba vincerò! Vincerò, vincerò!”

Vanish, o night! Set, stars! Set, stars! At dawn, I will win! I will win!

I will win!

At dawn, I will win.

Will shakes him softly awake some time later in the night. He glances miserably at the clock, reads the digitally given time of 2: 28, and heaves a long exhale before opening the door and walking around the front of the car to take over. The air is chilled and moist with the possibility for perspiration. He doesn't think it's quite cold enough for snow; perhaps it will rain.

"Four hours, Will?"

He nods sleepily where he's resting his forehead against the window. He crosses his arms and sinks into unconsciousness easily. Hannibal takes them back onto I-90 and drives for a while until the signs take him to the 94. Will sleeps soundly at his side. Hannibal leaves the music off. The rain begins to fall after they pass through Tomah. It stops as they drive alongside Black River Falls and then picks up again at Eau Claire. The orange streetlights lining the interstate casts the speckled shadows of raindrops on Will's face.

Hannibal drives for five hours instead of four, feeling more awake than he did initially, and Will begins to come to on his own once the sun rises fully over the horizon. He takes a few moments to collect himself out of his daze and takes the last three hour stretch when Hannibal stops at a gas station.

Will tries to initiate another game of twenty questions, but Hannibal isn't awake enough to deduce what sort of object could stand taller than a house and be neither dead nor mechanical. He can't even be roused to react when it turns out to be the oak tree in his backyard. Will is actually quite energetic after having been allowed to sleep for so long. He talks and Hannibal listens as he drifts nebulously in between dozing and waking. He's more comfortable than he has any right to be.

"I used to have this recurring dream back when I was still taking all those drugs for the encephalitis that Abigail was a Nereid. You know what those are; like the sirens except they actually help people on the water as opposed to drowning them. She was one of those—I don't know how I knew that, but it was one of those things you just understand as reality as you're dreaming it. Anyway, I dreamt Garrett Jacob Hobbs was sailing, and she led him into a storm.

"But he was killed in this awful storm, and in an act of revenge, he turned the other Nereids that looked just like her into humans. They all drowned out in the middle of the ocean, and she could only watch them sinking deeper and deeper into the ocean. Nothing happened to her, but she was alone night after night. I kept having that dream, and I couldn't do anything to change what happened. The perspective started shifting after a while, and I realized…I was the one who brought the storm down over their heads. I was the one who broke it all.

"You'll love this: I used to try to blame it on you. I would try so hard to find you in the clouds or in the waves, but you weren't anywhere to be found. Sometimes I heard you shaking me awake, but I could never find you on that plane.

"It was like Great Falls Park except when I asked you to come down, you couldn't. I would wake up angry at you sometimes because there we were, Abigail and I; the world fell into chaos around us, and you couldn't save us."

Hannibal dreams of a sapphire blue sea stretching out for miles ahead of him. Wet sand squeezes between his toes. A brilliant city waits peacefully behind him filled of warm homes and bustling market places and open courtyards. He can hear the children shrieking in laughter. He dreams Will is at his left and Abigail at his right. Her neck bleeds, and Will stoically stands guard from behind a pair of fully dilated pupils. His eyes are on the city, and Abigail's are pointed out toward the water.

As they watch the few sailboats out on the edge of the silvery horizon crumple in on themselves and sink. The city burns and the people scream.

Abigail observes the carnage coolly and asks, *Now what?*

The blood never stops flowing. Endless ships collapse in the distance. An unbroken chain of black smoke clouds lashes at the pale blue canopy of sky and distant atmosphere.

Will smiles at him in his dream and says, *We're in love, aren't we?*

Hannibal attempts to speak, but he chokes on the smoke encroaching on the shoreline where they stand, the three of them, in the water to their knees.

Hannibal?

Will touches his arm and the black drips out of his eyes leaving only dead, glazed eyes in their stead. His fingers kill Hannibal's skin where he touches; the arm blackens through as if with frostbite. He coughs and wheezes around the char in the air. The trees and the building and the people all burn.

Hannibal, wake up.

We dismantle the chaos, we dismantle the chaos, Abigail sings happily as she leads them though the decimated streets. He stumbles after her and takes in the sight of the ruined city. She leaps gracefully over the scorched bodies and cradles Hannibal's gangrenous wrist in her gentle fingers and joins his hand with Will's atop the smoking heap of ashes in the middle of the Pompeian wreckage.

It's all you ever wanted, Abigail assures Hannibal breathlessly as she releases their hands. *Freedom,* she exclaims emphatically, gesturing at the burnt remains of a thousand lives they have claimed as their own. Abigail smiles and concludes, *Family.*

Hannibal, damn it.

Rain explodes out of the black and turquoise sky to put out the flames and drench them. He blinks out of the dream with some difficulty but eventually manages to recapture his awareness completely. Will caps a half empty water bottle before tossing it into the backseat.

"Are you all right?" Will leans over into Hannibal's space, concerned. He brushes his fingers along Hannibal's cheek, and Hannibal closes his eyes. He pinches the bridge of his nose.

Slurring slightly, he asks, "Did you do that on purpose?"

Will's stunned confusion is enough of an answer, but he still says, "No. What?"

"I dreamt of the sea."

"Were you drowning?"

"Others were." Hannibal presses his fingers gently to his eyelids. "Others burned alive."

"Jesus, no, I didn't mean to do that. Wait, so I guided your dream—er, nightmare?"

"It wasn't a nightmare," Hannibal murmurs sleepily. He clears his throat. "It only surprised me."

"You were shaking for part of it." Will gives Hannibal time to respond, but changes the subject when Hannibal makes no move to do anything of the sort. "We're here. I hope you know what we're doing."

"We're waiting for Jack."

"And then?"

"Is that gun loaded?"

Will swallows and looks out the front of the windshield.

"I mean Jack no harm, Will. He is essential to the remainder of our plans."

He stares a while longer at the house and his eyes widen. "I won't shoot you, Hannibal."

With confidence, Hannibal says, "Jack will not allow you to shoot me."

"But…" Will's fingers ease along Hannibal's cheek to nestle in at the nape of his neck. He scratches his nails lightly against Hannibal's skin, brushing the short hairs one way and then the other. He sighs and says nothing else.

"If you give him time to stop you whilst raising your sights," Hannibal begins as he takes Will's other hand to hold it over his heart. He reaches up with his left hand to manacle his wrist loosely with his fingers. "Jack will disarm you in time to prevent you from even pulling the trigger."

Will takes his hands away and folds his arms over the steering wheel. Hannibal rubs his back soothingly.

"We should go in, Will."

"I know. Just…can we…"

Hannibal leans over the space separating their seats and takes Will up in his arms. He goes like a small child with a skinned knee, not because he is cowed or resigned to defeat but

because he knows this is an end. It may not be the permanent type of end they will inevitably suffer someday as all people do, but it is an ending. Endings are hard. Hannibal knows.

He combs his fingers through Will's hair and inhales deeply. Will isn't afraid, and Hannibal is so proud he could laugh with it, so he does. He laughs and presses his lips to Will's. Will smiles, confused but grateful for the desired intimacy. He's wonderful, and he really has no idea just how much.

He's wonderful, he's wonderful.

"I'm ready."

They get out of the car, enter in through the taped up backdoor, and wait at the window together where Jack won't be able to see them when he drives up the path. Will threads their fingers together and holds the gun in his other hand, loaded and with the safety clicked off. Hannibal squeezes his hand and takes him to the kitchen when the anticipated car finally comes. He kisses Will hard and then soft before letting him go and schooling his features into a mask of unperturbed calm. Will breathes out heavily through his nose and purses his lips together. He raises the gun at level with Hannibal's chest.

"We would've ended up here regardless of what I chose." He laughs shakily, eyes shining. "Everything would have been exactly the same because—because we're the same person." His jaw clenches, and he blinks back the tears threatening to fall. "It never would have made any difference to you, whether I fell for you or whether I hated you. Love's so nearly hate anyway, but I bet you were curious."

A door opens softly down the hall.

"Someone like me, who thinks the way I think; someone who wants the same things you want." His breath catches, and he says, "Someone who wanted more than anything to just not be alone anymore."

"Will," Jack calls his name from the doorway in low warning. Will's eyes flick to him once. "Put the gun down."

Hannibal watches Will's face, admiring the lack of hesitance when he raises the gun as if for a headshot. Jack doesn't disappoint. He never does, really.

Will goes down quickly, body surging back as if someone had roughly shoved him. Hannibal allows his shoulders to drop an inch in faux-relief without causing his posture to slouch. Jack presses his hand to Hannibal's arm in a show of compassion, though his eyes are fixed on Will. Hannibal looks to see Will slumped back against the cabinets and watching them back, tears dried from his eyes but not staining his unshaven face.

Hannibal hears Will's whispered, "See."

Can't you see, Will had whispered to him once seemingly an entire lifetime ago. *Don't you see me?*

Look at me.

I know you see me.

Hannibal watches, and he does see. He smiles as Jack crouches down to speak in hushed tones to the man sprawled before them nursing a wounded shoulder. Will watches Hannibal, lips parting just enough that Hannibal can decipher the answering smile from it.

He hears Abigail's voice in his mind saying, *We dismantle the chaos.*

We dismantle the chaos.

Chapter End Notes

"People Will Say We're in Love" is a Richard Rodgers' song from *Oklahoma!* But you probably know I'm referencing the line from *Silence of the Lambs*.

Con te Partiro lyrics as performed by Andrea Bocelli (first used in Ch. 4 of Riders on the Storm)
http://lyricstranslate.com/en/Con-te-partiro-duet-Sarah-Brightman-Time-say-goodbye.html#songtranslation
Und lied hierher > http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcrfvP11Hbo
(We all just need to speak German sometimes, I guess?)

Nessun Dorma lyrics
http://classicalmusic.about.com/od/opera/qt/nessundormatext.htm

Studies on Word-Formation in Lithuanian
http://www.lituanus.org/1974/74_3_05.htm

The Unknown Soldier

Chapter Summary

> Endings are only beginnings.

Chapter Notes

> *Wait until the war is over and we're both a little older/The unknown soldier/Breakfast where the news is read/Television children fed/Unborn living, living, dead/Bullet strikes the helmet's head*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He wakes alone in a hospital bed, blood pounding rhythmically through his brain in time with his elevated pulse. The window overlooks a vacant, cloistered courtyard cast completely in shadow. His heart rate slows as the seconds erode into minutes that drag into hours. It doesn't surprise or sting him that Hannibal isn't in the room, though the disappointment threatens to consume and dishearten him anyway.

A nurse discovers him awake and staring out the window in his bed after some uncertain amount of time has ticked down. Will's throat closes around the simple answers she seeks from him. His veins feel icy in his arm with the familiar, slow trickle of intravenous fluids entering his body.

She leaves the room and returns with a security guard—no, police officer. He asks Will questions instead. It doesn't change that Will can't speak. It's too much to ask, even, that he think about anything apart from the intense pinpricking sensation bubbling underneath his skin along the edges of his eye sockets. He looks down, away from the low rumbling stream of questions the man presents. He stares into a wrinkled shirt and a jacket; he smells stale coffee and the hint of yeast that accompanies fresh bread.

The back of Will's neck hurts; his shoulder hurts; something near to his spine in the very core of him hurts. He thinks the last one has something to do with Hannibal, or maybe Abigail or both.

Although the words are lost, their meanings linger and stain the air in the artificially lit room. The man speaking wishes he didn't have to be here with Will, the way that they are. Remorse and oppressive guilt shivers off of him and into Will's headspace, wholly uncomfortable and recognizable. A strange sympathy that Will doesn't deserve hangs onto his voice—a voice too familiar to ignore.

“Jack?”

The man sighs and brings a chair to the bedside. He sits and catches Will’s eyes. Will isn’t afraid of what he’ll see or of what Jack will see. He isn’t afraid of the bad getting in or of the good getting out; he isn’t afraid of the converse either.

“Anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis,” he says as if reading off a doctor’s script. Will catches him handing the doctor’s clipboard back to the nurse standing by in the doorway. She sets it back on the foot of the bed and resumes her position by the only exit apart from the windows that don’t open—Will couldn’t check what with being tightly cuffed to the bedrail, but he could make an intuitive leap.

He sees it for what it is, a bottle neck going in and out: ground zero on quarantine.

“Gesundheit.”

Jack ignores him.

“You were sick, Will; really bad.”

He takes his time to formulate a coherent response. Clearly Jack doesn’t mean to cart him off to prison just yet. He has this time to collect himself and evaluate his current situation, and he means to use it to his benefit. He closes his eyes and thinks around the buzzing pain all along the planes of his face. That urgent, dull temperature Hannibal had trained him to detect has dissipated. The backs of his eyes no longer sting with the burning. He is himself, unobstructed.

“I’m not anymore.”

Jack doesn’t miss the tone of certainty in Will’s voice. He’s sharply attuned to every minor, incidental exchange taking place between them. Jack wouldn’t miss it anyway. For all that he may have attempted to ignore the warning signs, Jack could always read Will. When it counted, he always knew when Will was crumbling; always knew he could come apart in this way. Maybe he even knew it would happen and had resigned himself to the heavy loss of Will’s sanity.

Saving lives is a business, after all. The services rendered for that cost outweigh the backlash, or they should, according to Jack’s logic. It had never been about sacrificing Will, not really, but that element of tribute couldn’t be omitted.

Looking at Jack, Will can see that he has so nearly changed his mind; nearly, but not quite.

Will doesn’t blame him for it. Dissonance on its own can move mountains and destroy them. Jack can hold onto what he believes if he thinks it can save him, but nothing can save any of them. The longer they sit and stare in self-imposed silence, the more Will is convinced of the fact that life can ever go back to the way it was.

Abigail will always be broken from the inside out. The stain of her apparent death will tarnish Will long after his name is cleared. Hannibal’s world and his good name, whatever it’s

truly worth to him, will be ripped away.

Bella will die, and Jack will be alone. He will go on, and he will always mourn his dead protégés.

Jack will mourn Lass because Hannibal killed her. He will mourn Will because before all is said and done, Hannibal will have made him yearn for death a thousand times without ever once letting him have it. He may even mourn that he ever let Will fall for such a person, though it was never his place to decide, and really, it's not as if he was to know. None of them were. It could even be, branching off from that train of thought, that Jack will mourn the fictional Dr. Lecter who was always so studious and protective over Will. It would be an easier death over which to grieve than any of the others.

Jack clears his throat. Will looks up, and the nurse guarding the doorway has wandered off and left the door closed behind her. Will scans the room once, a hollow chill spreading through his body at the permanence of this morning.

"Beverly wanted to see you, before we take you out. I called her when I got in." Jack's voice is soft, not with the intention of soothing Will but with the leftover craving for a gentle slumber. Will looks complacently out the window to see the far edges of the horizon tinting pale blue. "Hey."

Will turns to face Jack and finds a disconcertingly vulnerable expression on the man's face. He blinks, drops his eyes, and hums in question.

Reluctant but determined to get the words out, he says, "Dr. Lecter wanted me to let him know when you woke up, so I did. He won't be here, but maybe…"

Will searches Jack's face to find him ironically avoiding eye contact.

He wonders, emptily, where he last left his glasses. He didn't have them when he went to Hannibal's practice or on the seventeen-hour drive to Minnesota. They're probably waiting for him in the cell where they plan to hold him. That, or maybe Jack is holding onto them for safekeeping. Will doesn't feel like asking. It's not terribly important where they've gone. He is equal parts fed up and disinterested.

It's strange to think that it ever mattered at all to him what people might see when they looked at him. It's strange to think that he could have been afraid of what they might uncover, but then, he did let Hannibal in. They had both been afraid in the beginning. Anymore, Will only feels ragged and stretched too thin.

A knock comes on the door. Jack stops his pacing by the foot of Will's bed, and Beverly eases in through the small opened space between the door and the wall. He touches her arm, steps around her, and slips out into the hall. The door closes behind him, and Beverly takes a few minutes to calmly study every surface of the room that isn't Will or the bed that has become the axis around which Will's range of motion extends.

Blood rushes up in his ears. He closes his eyes around it in an attempt to block out the shame trying to swallow him up. It's of no use, really. He feels the despair rippling through the thick

atmosphere of the stuffy room. It's heavy and it tugs on him as unrelentingly as gravity.

She is endlessly worried and angered and distraught, and Will can't do anything to undo what he's already done.

"Will." Her voice cuts through the din, and he looks up at her expectantly, like a person woken from a dream searching for an explanation. He is the last person in need of one and the last person from whom they can hope to discern any kind of reason, but here Beverly is. Countless questions hiss and shriek for attention in her mind, but there is only one with enough significance for her to pull it to the surface right here and now.

She asks him, "Did you kill Abigail Hobbs?"

Because it's the truth and because she would know if it wasn't, he says, "I don't know."

"*Evidence,* Will." Beverly sniffles once, eyes dry and resolve clear. She has an excellent poker face, but Will doesn't need the visual clues to read her distress. "You ran. Why?"

"I couldn't remember what happened in Minnesota. Abigail went up with me, but she didn't come back." He swallows, recalling his instinctive reactions to the possibility that he may have killed Abigail inadvertently.

Will glances back out the window away from Beverly toward the rising sun. The nurse had said something, or Jack had, he doesn't know, about Will being in a medically-induced coma. His heart rate doubles. Enough time could have passed since he'd been out. Hannibal could know by now whether Abigail was okay or not. The beeping of his heart monitor shocks him out of his reverie. Beverly's eyes are soft when he looks back at her. As he snaps out of his thoughts, she reassumes her imperturbable mask. He hides his smile. Hannibal would be impressed, however accidental the manipulation of the simple machine had been.

People are simple machines, too, Will thinks darkly.

His eyes widen slightly at the unbidden musings. It's a thought he didn't mean to have. It's a thought he never wants to point at Beverly ever again.

Just let me be the villain, Katz. Just let me fall.

The metal cuffs rattle when he tries to take the tethered hand through his hair. He stares at the unbreakable bonds for a moment before dropping that hand and lifting his other instead. Hannibal's makeshift splint has been replaced with a sturdier one. He would prefer something Hannibal made for him, but perhaps getting shot and flailing around at the violence of the bullet lodging itself into his shoulder had disrupted it beyond repair.

Perhaps everything they had been working so hard to achieve could be described in much the same way.

"Why did you take Dr. Lecter with you?"

He has enough presence of mind not to laugh at the question, but only barely. Perhaps, like Will, once confronted with the possibility that he could kill another human being and

habituate himself to the experience, Beverly would think him incapable of sentimental attachment as Will once thought of Hannibal. He isn't so sure he doesn't still attribute Hannibal with that degree of heartlessness, but he has enough leverage now not to worry about being left behind to rot in some cell with or without it. The existence of a consummate, reciprocal bond between them would further cement their agreements, spoken and implied, but by no means did they need it anymore.

Will needed it once to trust Hannibal, and Hannibal needed it to believe in Will's ability to keep up with him; it had presented itself, fittingly, in the form of a highly combustible passion. The bliss wouldn't have lasted anyway, but it had felt deeper than sparks and more meaningful than brushfires. Will experienced lashing, violent burning and he had been promised more of the same. Hannibal told him it could be permanent. He told him they could be free.

He can't tamp down the disappointment, the melancholy, he feels at the prospect of it all having been for a passing thrill. The thought of being with Hannibal and not being loved by him leaves a dull, slow ache in Will's chest, but he had forced himself to live with even worse horrors than a requited love left to wither on the vine.

He hopes Hannibal does love him for all the trouble he's caused.

He hopes his head will hurt marginally less once the drugs have completely left his system. Beverly shifts slightly across from him, and her question resurfaces in his mind the way sound tumbles through the muffled din of water as the surface is breached.

"I didn't want to go alone." Will blinks. "I thought that if I couldn't take him with me, I'd never get to be with him again. I felt like…maybe I could prove something if I succeeded, but this has all gone to hell."

He remembers thinking before that he could substitute for the realm of the dead simply because he saw enough of it not to be afraid anymore. Foolish in his whimsy, he had even been proud of the duality matched between him, the personification of the Underworld, and Hannibal, the devil, its master.

"It's a bit worse than hell." He looks up at the sound of Beverly's hesitation. "We're in Baltimore, Will. They're taking you to a hospital for the criminally insane."

Will frowns at the abruptness of the name and then grits his teeth around the familiarity of it. It leaves a bad taste in his mouth to say it, but he does: "Chilton."

"Dr. Bloom said something about how you would hate it," she says softly. "Dr. Lecter tried to have you transferred somewhere else, but no one else is really equipped to deal with…"

"A psychopath," Will supplies.

"You were sick."

It's in her voice how much she wants to believe that the whole truth is summed up in that one statement. It's in her eyes how little she can actually make herself commit to it. Part of it

could at least be the encephalitis; the hallucinations alone could explain a lot—it would definitely shed some light on what had happened at the LeBeau crime scene.

Much of it, he knows, will be attributed to his empathy; to the abundance of mirror neurons he has hoarded in his brain since early childhood. A smaller part will be accredited to his work with the FBI.

He wonders, vaguely, if anyone will even think about Hannibal's role in the whole thing. They'll ask, of course, how Hannibal could ever have missed the signs; they'll ask why he didn't see it coming; they'll ask how he could have overlooked the encephalitis as a surgeon and as a therapist. They'll question his relationship, working and personal, with Will. They'll question the apparent hostage situation in which Jack had found them the morning he shot Will and brought him in.

He's curious what Hannibal will say to those who go to him seeking out the truth. He burns to know how Hannibal will thwart them, as he always has managed to keep them from getting too close.

The door opens, and Will snaps out of his dazed, blank stare. Beverly is on her feet in an instant. He doesn't try to look at her as Jack comes in with several more armed officers. It's probably worth noting that Jimmy and Brian aren't among them, but he doesn't let himself think about it beyond the mild relief he feels in the wake of their absences.

A male nurse with large biceps guides Will's unchained arm into a loose sleeve and then fits a snug collar around his head. He takes a deep breath and steels himself for what comes next. Jack locks eyes with Will once before he unmanacles his hand from the bedrail as if to say, *Don't even think about trying to run.*

The straitjacket comes down over his front. The nurses standing on either side of the bed manhandle him into an upright position and work on buckling and tightening the straps every which way that they need to go. Will's breath catches around one particularly rough tug to his left, balance completely dependent on the hands of other people as his own are bound tightly to his sides. Jack steadies him as he teeters precariously toward the edge of the bed.

His heart hammers in his chest, and he is thankful that his IVs and the heart monitor clip have all been removed already. It's bad enough that this has to happen to him without the physiological effects of a stupid fear being broadcast to everyone in the room.

He looks around briefly, and Beverly has disappeared.

Will gasps involuntarily when they pull him to his feet. His legs are still slightly unsteady beneath his unsteadily lurching body. They walk him out to the elevators, a male officer at his left flank and a female officer at his right. Their hands don't grip him hard but only exert enough pressure to be a constant reminder of his place in the proceedings.

Jack rides down with Will and the two officers, and it becomes painfully obvious in the cramped space of the elevator that he can't control his breathing.

He twitches his fingers uselessly against his ribs, flexes his shoulders, and tugs on the sleeves. Nothing gives, nothing moves, nothing frees him. His hands are lost to him. His freedom is buried somewhere in the constrictive garment and unforgiving cinches binding the fabric together. Will bows his head forward and counts quickly up to twenty and back down several times until they make it outside into the crisp parking lot. He sucks in the cold air of a cloudy sunrise and tumbles into the back of the transport vehicle when they hoist him inside.

He curls in on himself and shivers trying to calm himself down. Small spaces hadn't frightened him since he was very young. The stifling restriction of this corporal kind of confinement, however; he must breathe around it.

No one speaks as Will struggles through his panic. Jack sits across from him, and the other two officers sit by the doors.

They catch four red lights before the tension in Will's body drains out of him. He's too tired still from the drugs left over in his system to handle fear or full-body involvement in the experience of said fear. He sighs weakly and turns to rest the side of his head on the wall rocking and murmuring behind him. His hair has matted in cold, wet clumps across his sweating forehead.

He deserves to be afraid. He even deserves the specific use of the straitjacket, what with the precise sort of flight risk he'd branded himself as being the first time he escaped from a vehicle exactly like this one. He considers asking whether Chilton has come back yet as Will hasn't kept tabs on the doctor after what Gideon did to him, but he keeps his inquiries to himself. Jack may not want to tell him, and he doesn't want to attempt speaking coherently after the scene he's made since his restraint in the hospital. He'll find out soon enough what it feels like to be housed alongside with criminally insane, whether Chilton is there to oversee it or not.

Five red lights later the vehicle rolls to a dead stop. The engine switches off, and the two officers Will doesn't know shuffle about for a moment before the doors swing open with overlapping creaks.

Jack is delicate with him, still feeling entirely responsible and miserable over what has befallen Will. He works hard at concealing that he feels anything moderately resembling sympathy toward Will; toward an inmate not unlawfully detained for several acts of gruesome, cold-blooded murder. Will has nothing to say for himself in his defense. They went in circles around each other the day they arrested Will and the days following before he took his chance to run. Even if Jack does want Will to talk, he knows he won't say anything of interest or value, not for some time anyway. Jack won't say what Will wants to hear either.

They go through a few formalities, and as they deposit him in a neatly empty and depersonalized cell, Will notes Jack setting his glasses down on the writing desk opposite the bed. He refrains from sneering at the useless piece of furniture, wondering if they'll give him felt tip markers to use when he wants to write.

Jack stands in the cell alone with Will to unbuckle the restraints binding his arms to him. It's probably unwise, but Will is thankful for the privacy as it's a courtesy he will not be given again for he doesn't know how long. The taut sleeves slacken, and his shoulders sag as his

arms come free. He has the foresight to allow Jack to remove the sordid thing from him completely before collapsing tiredly onto the firm, narrow mattress. He huffs around a few deep inhales and exhales before pushing himself to a sitting position. When he finally rights himself Jack is safely on the other side of the bars. It's a better type of prison; wider and one wherein he can stretch his limbs.

He doesn't move from where he is as Jack looks in on him for a moment or two more, stoically observing Will like an insect in a jar. He bows his head forward, rubs the back of his neck, and huffs a single, short sigh before shaking his head. He looks up at Will, heavy words waiting to tumble out of his mouth. Will thinks he can see him shaking, but maybe it's just tension and nerves making Jack look so restless.

Tenderly, Will says, "You didn't do anything, Jack."

Something quivers once in Jack's chin before he manages to rein in his expression. His eyes gloss over, and he looks away, securing a handhold on one of the thick, black bars separating him from Will.

"Maybe that's what I did wrong," he bites out, voice strained and jaw clenched. "I could have stopped this. I could have done something, but we…you were so good out there, all the time."

"Except when I wasn't."

Jack closes his eyes, grip tightening around the bar in his hold.

"Except when you weren't," he agrees.

"What are you going to do about the Ripper, Jack?"

The man clears his throat once and opens his eyes. His gaze is fixed down the way they came, toward the main entrance into the long corridor of cells.

Distantly, he says, "I'm wondering if it wouldn't be better to let him go."

"You couldn't." Will waits for Jack to look at him. "You never could let go."

Something in Jack's face or eyes hardens. He straightens his posture, raises his chin, and presses his shoulders back.

"I'm sorry about this, Will. I'm—" The word fractures somewhere in the middle. He tries a different set of words, his face still a controlled illusion of calm acceptance. "I wish it hadn't come to this."

"But it did," Will says gently.

Conceding the point a second time, Jack murmurs, "But it did."

"Goodbye, Jack."

“You’ll see me again,” he assures Will unthreateningly. Softly, Jack tells him, “I’ll be back.”

“Okay.”

He goes, and Will’s day is hours of drugged tedium and alternating uproar. He can’t see into the cells on either side of him, and the wall opposite is a concrete wall. His placement at the end of the long corridor is no accident. They did it that way so he couldn’t directly look at or interact with another person. He wonders whose contribution it was and who all was consulted.

A night passes and then a tiresome dawn crests outside the hospital’s walls. He explores the tiny cell for all that it’s worth and discovers smoothed edges on the desk, mold assembling beneath the bolts securing the toilet to the floor, and a curious ball of dust under the bed. He picks at the frayed edges of the blanket and finally submits himself to the quiet ramblings of an exhausted mind. He sleeps once after the sun has risen but not for very long. It’s early still when the iron door swings open and then shut as if from much farther away than just several yards.

Will waits with his feet firmly planted on the floor and his hands clasped loosely together. He counts the footsteps, trying to remember how many he took on his way in. His memory of the journey is too cluttered with the faint, dizzy stain of fear to recall perfectly, but he anticipates the destination of those footsteps regardless.

They stop outside his cell, delicate and unassuming. Will doesn’t move.

He breathes in and out through his nose, trying to detect the subtle shift of a new scent permeating the air. It’s faint, but he catches the barest trace of it, the faint cardamom smell he would burrow into and call his home for the remainder of his life if he could.

“Hello, Will.”

As if summoned by a powerful incantation, Will stands languidly to his feet and approaches the bars. He takes his time drawing his eyes up the length of the imperiously tailored suit, the smooth knot of the tie, the unmarred mound of flesh stretched taut over a beautiful, privately sensitive throat, and up higher yet to the infuriating lines of Hannibal’s mouth, cheekbones, eye sockets. Will is glazed to the point of being able to feel his heartbeat in his fingertips and the vibrations of oxygen through his windpipe, and Hannibal looks, for the most part, largely undisturbed.

For the sake of possible listening devices and expected video surveillance feeds, Will acknowledges his presence the way he would a stranger’s, coldly and with little expectation or enthusiasm.

“Hello, Dr. Lecter.”

Something about the way he says it or the way Will looks at him causes Hannibal’s face to light up. An offensively warm smile spreads generously across his face. Will glows right about in the pit of his stomach at the sight, feeling his face fall at the look from which he

never learned to defend himself. Hannibal's eyes wrinkle at the corners, and a short, audible breath gusts passed Will's lips at Hannibal's openly proffered glimpse at the smile Will loves.

Belatedly, accidentally, the realization dawns on Will that the smile itself isn't the source of Will's elation and torment. The fact that it could be directed at him, be pulled out of obscurity for him, is the thing that drives his emotion and forces his feet to shuffle forward until he can go no further.

Will sighs shakily and rests his forehead against the bars separating him from Hannibal's touch, hands idly clenching at the vertical beams keeping him trapped in stasis. Hannibal's fingers slide along Will's knuckles and he doesn't react except to relax his grip on the cold, unbending iron and touch Hannibal back in the smallest ways that he can, given the circumstances.

Hannibal's hands are warm and the skin soft. Will nearly misses his words when he whispers, "My uncle called."

His heart beats out of rhythm in his chest and then settles at an even, quickened tempo. Hannibal can probably smell the shifts in his blood pressure as it fluctuates beneath his skin. He waits, tracing lines back and forth on the back of Will's thumb.

"And?"

He shifts his forehead higher up to see into Hannibal's eyes. He nods once, eyes bright with a promise dutifully kept.

Will exhales deeply and sags slightly against the bars, fingers curling around the fleshy mound of Hannibal's thumb. Relief floods his chest. Hannibal hums softly and curls his fingers around Will's. He's warm and constant, and the easy, tranquility pulses comfortably out of him and into Will through his fingers, the soft flesh of his throat, the nape of his neck.

He swallows hard around a new, visceral kind of fear bubbling high in the back of his throat and rasps, "I adore you."

"Yes, Will," Hannibal murmurs. He traces one more long line from the joint in Will's wrist to the pad of his forefinger. He mouths, "And I you."

Will breathes in deeply from his nose and takes his hand away from the bar as Hannibal steps away. They hadn't been standing very closely together. Only their hands had touched. The guards standing watch at the end of the corridor didn't see anything suspicious of it. They don't do anything to make Hannibal leave or take a step farther away.

Hannibal mouths to him, eyes alight with secret mischief that Will understands far too well, "Tave myliu."

"Mano tik," he replies softly with an added note of weariness that he doesn't bother to hide. Smiling, he adds, "Gėlyte."

"Arklite." Will doesn't ask, but Hannibal explains, "Horse."

“Baby.”

He winks at Hannibal’s silence, more cajolingly than he feels. It’s always been fun to banter with Hannibal in any harmless capacity. He suspects Hannibal enables him at all for the respite it provides him from the darker places his mind would take him if allowed to ruminate longer on the state of things.

“Žmogėdra,” Hannibal counters after a moment of watching Will with a fond look in his eyes.

“Don’t you forget it,” Will murmurs, leaning forward and winding his arms through the bars to rest his elbows as he studies Hannibal back.

His expression is open. His words have been said or otherwise communicated. Will remembers the pull of their bodies what seems like only a short while ago in Hannibal’s cozy bed for two in a big room that smelled of both of them. He remembers when it started between them in a darkened hotel room, and he remembers when they met in Jack’s office, how stripped bare he *didn’t* feel under Hannibal’s careful gaze, even though Hannibal was the only one who ever really understood him to the very center of his being.

Will smiles and his eyes drift shut, tired for very different reasons than just insomnia, exhaustion, or depleted resources. Hannibal doesn’t drift away from his spot. Will hums around the slow passing of physiological electricity and empathy crackling mutedly between them.

“So, doctor,” he drawls. “Ever have any problems?”

“No,” Hannibal muses. A chair scrapes from behind Will’s closed eyes. “Never.”

Chapter End Notes

Tave myliu = I love you, mano tik = my only, gėlyte = flower (diminutive), arklite = horse (diminutive), žmogėdra = cannibal

Can't decide yet whether to leave you here or continue on. In any case, I shall be focusing my energy for the foreseeable future on school and my other writing projects. I do have a fourth part tentatively planned, but no promises on what to expect next from me. Thanks everyone for all the love and support and praises and internet hugs. You're all spectacular. *whale noises*

Prepare your butts. So begins the he-ate-us.

*EDIT: This series is closed, friends. No more beyond this point.

End Notes

Lyrics by the Doors.

Works inspired by this one

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